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PRESS

ADULT
READERS



PEARL

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by Lars Hellberg ♦ Illustrated by Ayame Emaya

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GOVERNMENT ISSUE

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by Renee Carter Hall ♦ Illustrated by Aura Moser

## ClosetCoon

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♦ by Jeff Kun

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 ℓℓℓ = Casual sexual interaction or frequent suggestive situations.  
 ℓℓℓℓ = Significant sexual interaction or frequent depictions of casual sexual interaction. May also contain violence or unusual situations, and may carry additional warnings.  
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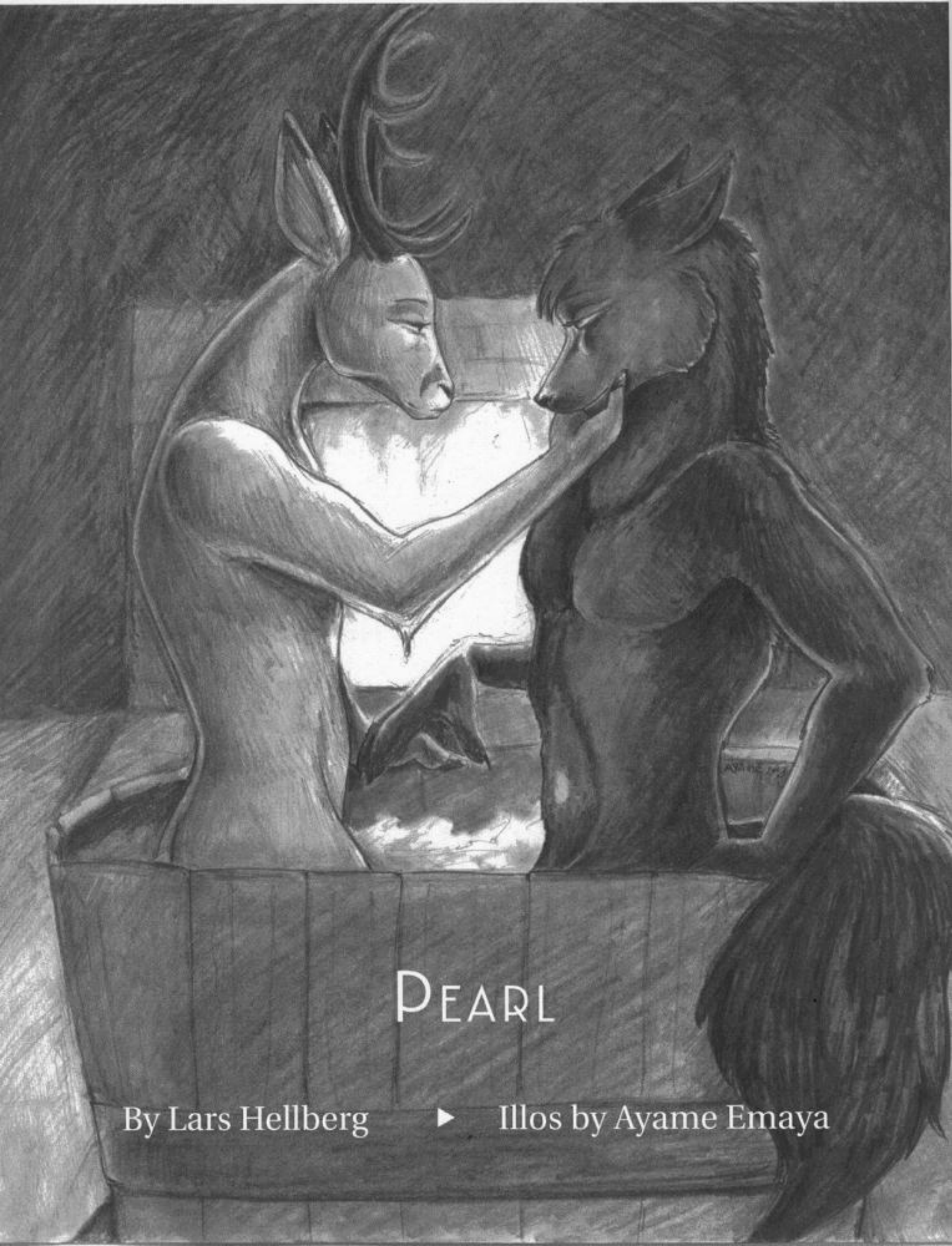
by Kyell Gold ♦ Illustrated by Taurin Fox

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WETA

▶ ONE



PEARL

By Lars Hellberg



Illos by Ayame Emaya

Leaning on the bar counter, Pearl sighed deeply. The heavy rain outside showed no sign of letting up, which meant that there wouldn't be many customers that night, if any. He was a social wolf, and didn't look forward to spending the night alone. All the glasses, plates and cutlery had been washed and cleared away; he had swept the floor and wiped the tables. Everything that could possibly be done. For a while, he considered cleaning the windows, but decided to leave them. Maybe he would do that later. The tavern was to close two hours after midnight, no sooner, no later; Mr. Casden had been very specific. Sighing again, he reached for a bowl of teshia nuts, and began juggling some of them. Growing quickly bored, he started munching one, putting the rest back. No overnight customers, no drinkers, no eaters. No one gambling or dancing or sharing stories by the raging log fire that would spread its warmth, if only there was business as usual. People seemed hell-bent on staying home, and Pearl didn't really blame them. He wouldn't go out in this weather, either. As the old wall clock behind the counter ticked its way past five, he started yawning, absent-mindedly scratching his jet black chin fur. Might as well get some shut-eye, he thought, wandering over to lock the front door. Not daring to leave the main hall, he pulled off his cotton apron and his shirt, curling up on a table with his head on the make-shift pillow. Characteristically for a canine, he fell asleep almost instantly.

After a short while, his feet began kicking, and his nose twitching. Tiny whimpers escaped his muzzle as he dreamt. He was a cub again, running across the lawn outside his parents' house. Half a pace behind him, he could hear the soft panting of his sister. China, being three years his elder, had no need to exert herself to keep up with him, and soon she caught him, giving him a tackle that sent them tumbling. Pinning his arms above his head, she grinned as she sat on his chest, almost squeezing the air out of his lungs. Using a claw, she traced down his soft, black chest fur, reaching his ticklish stomach. Squirming and kicking, he tried in vain to get free, his giggling soon turning into screams of laughter.

"Give up, or I'll tickle you blue," she growled. "Give up!"

"Give! I give up!" he screamed through fits of laughter. "Your hunting knife's in the third kitchen drawer."

"Why did you take it, squirt?"

"Just horsing around. You're so fun to... China? What are you...?"

Grinning wickedly, the young she-wolf started tapping his forehead with her knuckles. Curiously enough, Pearl thought, the sound she made was just as if she had been banging her fists against dead wood.

It took several knocks on the heavy wooden door before the black fur bundle stirred, but once he was awake, Pearl hurried to open. A quick glance at the clock said half eight. He had slept for over two hours.

As he unbolted the door, the knocking returned, and he opened somewhat impatiently, almost hitting the cloaked figure outside.

"Whoa! Take it easy, there, my friend. Nearly took my head with you. This establishment is open, isn't it?"

"Y-yes," Pearl stammered. "Yes, of course it is, come on in! I'm sorry I was late, but I had me a bit of an inventory trip to the store rooms."

"Yes, I can see that." The figure pulled back the hood of his cloak, revealing himself as a tall roe buck. Pearl guessed his age at mid-twenties. He grinned impishly, pointing at the wolf. "I can see that. You're half-naked, your clothes are in a heap, on a table, and your fur is flattened. Either you've been asleep, good sir, or I interrupted you at a really bad moment."

Blushing, Pearl hurried to get dressed, feeling the buck's eyes on his back as he took his place behind the counter. The stranger sat down on a bar stool, still smiling.

"Beer, please. Not the strongest, but if you have something a bit lighter."

"Naturally."

"You were asleep, weren't you?"

"Y-yes. There were no customers, and I got tired." He laid back his ears, defensively. "I thought I'd get a few minutes, but I didn't wake up until you knocked."

"And knocked again. You sure I didn't interrupt anything...intimate?"

"Quite positive, sir," Pearl said, blushing again as he poured the drink. "I'm all alone here."

"Well, the weather is not one for travelers. Sir, pardon me for asking, but don't you look a bit young to manage such a place? Hmm?"

"I'm twenty, sir. Mr. Casden, the owner, left me in charge while he's away on business."

"Ah. Could you serve me dinner, do you think?"

"Gladly! It would take me a while, though. I have nothing prepared. What would you like?"

"Oh, nothing fancy, anything quick and hot will do. A bowl of soup would be nice."

"Beef or fish?"

"Beef, please. I would have breakfast in the morning, if you please."

"You're staying the night, sir?"

"Were you hoping to close early and go home, Mr. Wolf? In this weather?"

"Wolf? Oh, I forgot to introduce myself! Many pardons, kind sir, my name is Pearl."

"A pleasure. I am Cheven. On my way to catch a ship here in Keel's Rest. To answer your question, Pearl, I will spend the night. This weather has me soaked."

"Room will be four markers and a half, five with a hot bath."

"That I'll have." Cheven placed a ten markers silver coin on the counter. "This covers the meals as well, I think, and anything I may drink during the night. Might even be some change, then that's tip."

"Most generous, Mr. Cheven."

They kept talking while Pearl peeled vegetables, preparing the meal. He found Cheven pleasurable company, and the half-hour it took to make the soup seemed to fly by. The buck told about his journey overseas, to claim a house he had inherited from his uncle, a house which he planned to make into his home. Pearl, in turn, told about how he had failed to graduate from the soldiering academy, and now made his way from work to work. Taking care of the tavern paid well, but was hard and stressful. Still, it was a splendid opportunity to meet new and interesting people.

"Yes," Cheven said. "I can tell you're sociable. Bet you love it when the tavern is crowded, and everybody is vying for your attention, to have their drinks refilled, or just to chat."

"Mhm. Those nights are the best." For a brief moment, Pearl's gaze turned inwards, a smile playing on his muzzle. "It gets lonely when there's nobody around."

"Why did you leave soldiering? You look healthy enough."

"Well, I..." Pearl began, unsure as to whether or not to continue. "Excuse me, but I think the soup is ready."

"Aah, dinner! Would you join me?"

"Gladly. Free meals come with the job."

They ate in silence, occasionally looking up at each other. Pearl knew that he was a good cook, and with the tavern's first class foodstuff, the soup turned out nothing short of delicious. But as the bowls were emptied, the wolf grew nervous. He really didn't want to talk about the academy, but how would he find a polite way to avoid it? The buck was a nice person, and Pearl didn't want to upset him. As Cheven leaned back in his chair, sighing and stroking his belly contentedly, Pearl hurried out into the kitchen with the dishes. He was just about to start cleaning them, when his guest called for him.

"Dear Pearl, would you mind heating my bath water, while I relax with my pipe?" As the wolf brought a large iron pot to the fireplace, the buck winked at him. "By the way, you were in such a hurry I had no time to compliment on the meal. You're really an excellent cook."

"Th-thank you, Mr. Cheven. That's nice of you to say." He blushed slightly.

"Please, my friend, no titles. Tonight, I'm Cheven, and you're Pearl. Both trapped underneath a warm ceiling in a cold rainstorm." Cheven smiled warmly, and Pearl couldn't help grinning back. "That's better. Now, don't mind the dishes, I'm sure they can wait. Join me for a smoke and a chat."

"Thanks, Mr. Ch... I mean, Cheven, but I don't smoke."

"Try some. It's a really mild tobacco, goes down smoothly."

Sitting down by the fire, right next to the buck, Pearl accepted the freshly lit pipe. He took a while to admire the object, which seemed to be carved out of some fine, polished wood. Taking the mouthpiece between his lips, he sucked lightly, feeling the warm smoke filling his

mouth. His first urge was to cough, but he resisted it, and drew breath. The taste was just about the foulest he had ever experienced, and it felt as if his lungs were scorched from the inside. Doubling over in a fit of coughing, he managed to barely miss falling into the fireplace. Rolling on the floor, he tried to breathe in deeply between the coughs, but found it hard. Slowly, though, the attack passed, and he sat up again, a sheepish look on his face as he handed back the pipe.

"I suppose it is an acquired taste," Cheven said, giving Pearl a concerned look. "Are you all right, my friend?"

"Not yet," Pearl rasped, "but I will be. I hope. Thanks for not laughing at me."

"Not at all. I looked just about the same when I had my first pipe, although that was stronger stuff than this."

"Ergh! I think my nose will never be the same."

"Of course. Canine smelling. No wonder you can't stand it. Now that I think of it, I don't think I've ever seen a smoking wolf."

"Well, try feeding me that again, and you'll see a fuming one." Pearl grinned, and Cheven laughed loudly.

"Ha! Well said, my friend. And if you get so mad you kill me, you won't have to cook me, because I'm..."

"...already smoked!" they both finished, laughing again. The buck was the first to find voice. "I'm glad I came here on such a night. I like your company, my wolf-friend." Pearl laid his ears back, accepting the compliment. "I'm so tired of the poorly veiled contempt that stands for politeness today. Really friendly people are rare, and a treat."

"I... I guess I never thought about that before," Pearl said, looking down. "I guess I don't see much politeness in those veils."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing," Pearl said, realizing he had said too much. "Just that people aren't even trying to seem polite, most of the time."

"Hmm. There's something on your mind, my friend. Well, I shan't pry." He looked away, sucking his pipe again. "You really are going to eat me, aren't you?"

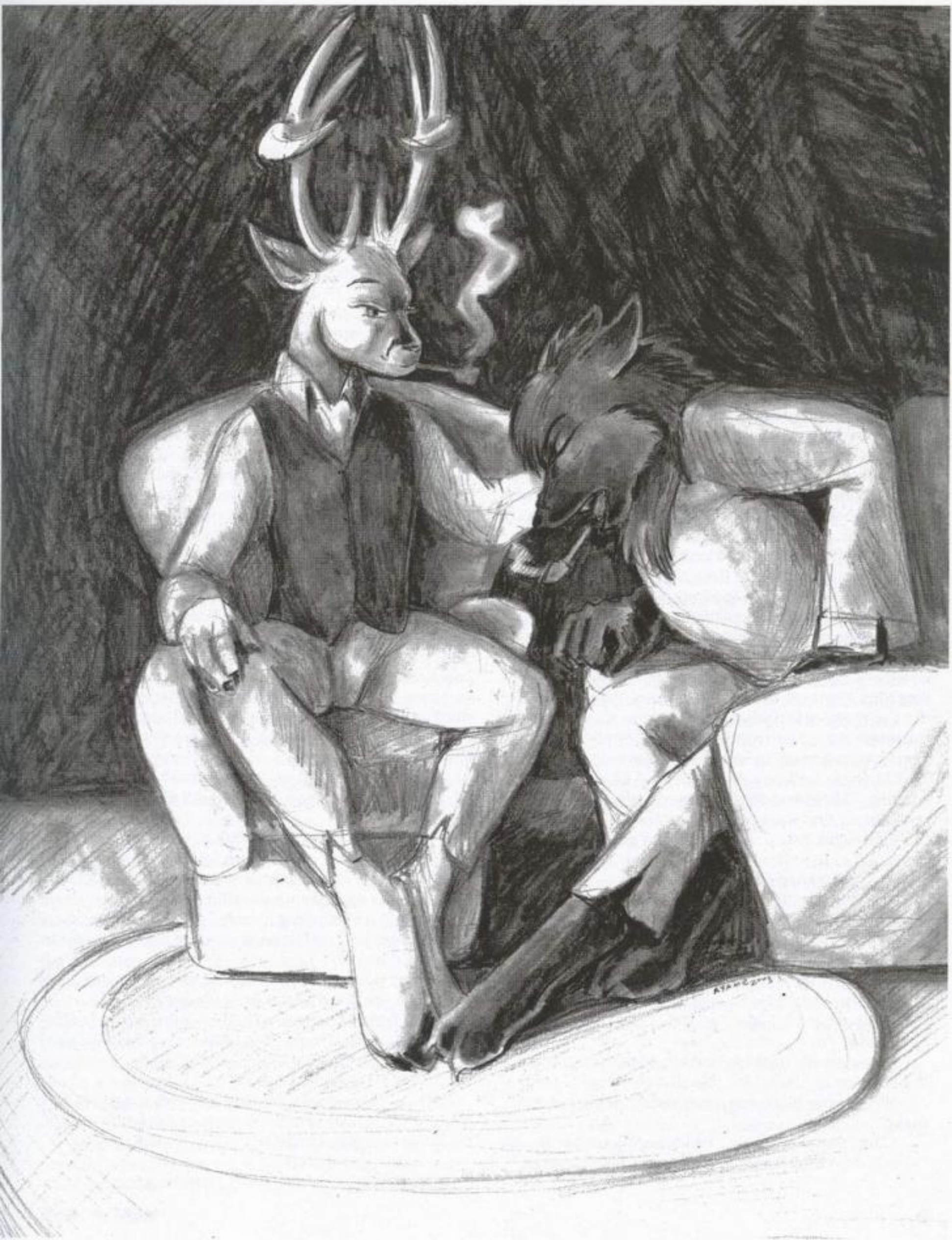
"Of course not! Why?"

"Then why is my bath water boiling?"

"Oh no! I forgot the pot!"

The third pot of steaming water was just enough to fill the large wooden tub, that rested by the smaller fireplace in Cheven's bedroom for the night. To save himself some trouble, Pearl had given him a room right next to the main hall, a fact that the buck had seen through to immediately, commenting on this with a wry smile. As Pearl put the pot down, he tossed some herbs and a grab of bath salt into the tub, and soon the steam filling the room had a fragrance of flowers to it. Cheven sniffed, sighing contentedly as he began taking off his clothes.

"Mmm, that smells so good. Like spring, if you could name a smell a season. What did you put in it?"



thinking: Then you...

"I'm not going to cook you, Cheven. It leaves your fur smelling nice." Pearl picked up the pot, moving towards the door. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll see about those dirty dishes."

"Aren't you going to wash my back?" Cheven asked, stepping out of his breeches. "The tip I left you was quite generous, I'd say. Why don't you get a sponge and grab the soap, and start earning it."

"But I..." Pearl thought for a moment. His tip would be a little under three markers. As Cheven said, very generous. But to stay would be...difficult. The sight of the naked buck already had him unsettled. Then again, most of him would be under water. Relenting, he put the pot down. "Oh, all right. Just step in, and I'll get a sponge."

When he came back, Cheven had sat down in the tub, and was humming contentedly, his pipe lit once more. Thankfully, Pearl noticed, he did his best to blow the smoke away from the sensitive wolf nose. Slipping out of his apron and shirt, Pearl reached into the water to soak the sponge, then began rubbing it across the buck's neck. Cheven leaned forward, and Pearl had to steel himself in order not to let his eyes wander very far down the muscular back. Grabbing the bar of soap, he lathered up, and started applying a generous amount of suds. He used his hands to rub it in, then rinsed the buck's short, dense fur with the sponge. As he finished, Cheven suddenly put his pipe down, standing up. Pearl couldn't keep in a short gasp, as the buck turned to face him. His body was mostly covered by foam from the soapy water, but what could be seen was seen all the more, the fur flattened to the skin. Swallowing hard, Pearl forced himself to look the buck in the eyes.

"Might as well do a thorough job," Cheven said, winking. "Those hands of yours are really skilled. You could easily find work at a bath house."

"Th-thank you. I...I'll just go and get some more hot water."

"Just don't keep me freezing."

Bringing another potful of steaming water, Pearl set to work, gritting his teeth to stay professional. I'm earning my tips, being a good host, he thought. Nothing more. Using the sponge, as well as his hands, he lathered the buck up thoroughly, then used a ladle to wash him off with hot water. Like an artist admiring his canvas, he stepped back, nodding.

"There. Fur's all shining, now."

Grinning, the buck stroked his arms. "Indeed. My thanks, Pearl. I haven't felt this clean for days."

"Would you like some clean water, for a good, hot soak?"

"That would be lovely." He looked down into the tub. "This doesn't look like something to sit back down in."

fit the buck, the wolf took a slight bow. "If you'd like to step out, you could keep warm by the fire while I change your water."

"I think you'll need a hand with that," Cheven said, tying the robe as Pearl strained to move the heavy tub. "Don't sprain yourself."

"Usually, we're at least two when we move this thing," Pearl said, wiping sweat from his brow. Combining their efforts, they managed to empty and put back the wooden tub. "I hope you didn't get sweaty again."

"Not at all."

"Sit down, now, and relax, while I fill it up again."

Shortly, new clouds of steam made their way to the ceiling, accompanied by the smell of fresh herbs. Pearl checked the water, dipping his pinky and proclaiming perfect temperature.

"One could almost drink this as tea," Cheven mused, as he began untying his bath robe. Pearl quietly made his way to the door, but this time, too, the buck's voice stopped him. "Won't you stay? I really like your company."

"Th-that's nice of you to say, but I..."

"Please, Pearl. It's so good to have someone friendly to talk to."

The slight plead in his voice made Pearl relent, but he pretended to hesitate until he heard splashing. When he turned around, Cheven was already sitting down, grinning broadly as he enjoyed the warmth. Pearl put a couple of more logs on the fire, then grabbed a chair and sat down. They kept up a polite conversation for a while, until the dreaded question arose once more.

"By the way," Cheven said. "You never told me why you quit soldiering."

Pearl lowered his gaze, laying his ears back. "I'm not all that comfortable, talking about it. I didn't leave, I was thrown out."

"Oh. Maybe you're right. If it's painful for you, then we could talk about other things." Cheven placed a hand on Pearl's arm, soothingly, but withdrew it quickly. "Pearl, you're soaked with sweat!"

"Well, it is kind of hot in here," the wolf answered, smiling weakly. "And I've been carrying that heavy pot to and fro..."

"Won't you join me?" Cheven asked, moving to one side of the tub. "You could use some water."

Pearl froze. Whatever he had intended to say, stuck in his mind. True, the tub was well large enough for two. True, he could use a bath himself. But...

"What if I get a customer?"

"I'm sure you won't. Not in this weather, and it's dark already, too. Even the highwaymen stay at home tonight. Come on in, while it's still hot."

"I'm not sure it would..."

"It's a wonderful idea, Pearl. Don't be a fuss."

Relenting, part of his mind screaming at him to stop, Pearl untied his breeches, while stepping out of his shoes. As he was ready to get in, Cheven pointed to a perfectly round, white patch of fur on Pearl's stomach.

"I didn't notice that before. Is it a birth mark?"

"I guess you could say that. It gave me my name."

"It's pretty," Cheven said, as Pearl stepped into the tub, sitting down with a sigh opposite him, their legs becoming entangled. The buck waited until he had settled in, before catching his eyes. "So are you."

"Thank you."

Pearl's voice felt flat, and he lowered his gaze, blushing feverishly. Looking down was a mistake, he realised, as the clear water gave him a good view of Cheven's naked body. Was this for real? Was the buck really flirting with him? Or had he just made a comment, and Pearl was misinterpreting it? The latter had happened before. But Cheven seemed so nice, so genuinely honest... Within Pearl, walls of resistance he had been building for the last few years began giving way. And I promised myself, he thought, never to let anybody get to me again. Gathering his courage, he did his best to find voice.

"You...you look very nice, too."

"I should think so, modesty forbids," Cheven laughed, a warm, hearty laughter. "You have been looking at me for most of the night, haven't you?"

"I tried not to, Mr. Cheven. I'm sorry if I've offended you."

"Not at all! And please, lay off with that Mister, Pearl. Actually, it feels good to be appreciated, especially by someone so strikingly handsome."

Cheven leaned forward, a firm hand lifting Pearl's still lowered muzzle, gentle eyes meeting his. Whatever doubts Pearl still held regarding the buck's honesty vanished, as he saw the want in those eyes. The wolf did not resist him, but allowed himself to be pulled into a short kiss. The brief contact made a shiver of pleasure course through his body, escaping his busy lips as a half-whimpered moan. Cheven kept their gazes locked, wanting to turn to passion as he tried to hold the kiss. They broke apart, however, and a tear ran down Pearl's cheek, pain rippling across his face.

"This... this was what got me thrown out of the academy." His breath broke into a sob, and he cried quietly as Cheven moved closer, hugging him gently. With his chin resting on the buck's shoulder, Pearl began talking, his voice quavering and unsure. "There was a boy at the academy, almost a year younger than me. We fell in love when we first met, and we used to sneak away to... play. As you can guess, one day we were caught kissing, inside a store room. Normally, it's severe punishment detail for disciples fooling around, but he got scared they would throw him out, so he blamed me. Said I'd pulled him into the store room, then forced myself upon him."

"And they believed this?"

Pearl nodded, still shivering with sobs. "My father is one of the most respected teachers at the academy. He was furious. Not only had I disgraced him, breaking the

rules, but I had also clearly shown him that our bloodline would break with me. I guess that's what hurt him the most. He didn't even let me defend myself, but saw to it that I was thrown out, without honours."

"That's harsh." Cheven stroked the wolf's black hair, trying to give him comfort. "Cold. A terrible thing to do."

"Of course, I wasn't welcome at home anymore, and of course, soon everybody knew about this. I thought about leaving town, but I'm too stubborn. I wanted to prove I'm still worth something. So, that's why I'm here. Mr. Casden, he let me work for him, not caring when someone asked why he'd hired one who had disgraced himself so."

"What about the other one? The boy who betrayed you?"

"From what I've heard, he's well on his way to officerhood, one of my father's favourite students."

"Now I understand why you didn't want to talk about it."

"I had told myself never to let it happen again," Pearl said, his voice filled with pain. "I had decided not to let myself feel attracted to anyone, ever again, but..."

"Yes?" Cheven tilted his head, smiling.

"But... you make me feel so good. Make me feel attractive."

"You are, Pearl. Very much so."

"So are you, Cheven. I..."

"Shh, no need to speak."

Once more, they met in a kiss, this time more passionate. Pearl's tears had dried away, despite the moist air in the room, and he started responding to the other's caresses. He opened his mouth to greet the buck's questing tongue, while he moved closer, making their embrace a tight one. Feeling light-headed, Pearl couldn't suppress a gasp as Cheven's hands grew bolder, his caresses more intimate. Crying out, the wolf threw his head back, splashing water onto the floor. Biting his lip, he was just about to let himself get carried away, when the touches ceased. Opening his eyes, Pearl saw, for the first time, hesitation in the buck's eyes.

"Cheven, what...?"

"This... this is more than I wanted." His voice was little more than a whisper. "Pearl, I... I don't know what to say..."

"Just say you want to end it, here and now," Pearl whispered back. "Say it, and I'll go."

"No! No, it's not like that!" Pearl had started to get out of the tub, but Cheven grabbed his arm, making him sit back down. "When I saw you looking at me, I thought I'd flirt a little, good-naturedly. Now we're kissing, and... touching..."

"I'm so sorry, Cheven," Pearl said, new tears welling up in his eyes. "I didn't mean to push you, I just..."

"But that's it! You've done nothing to push me, little wolf. I want this. It's just so... unexpected. I had to stop, to think. And I've thought."

"Thought, about what?"

"Pearl, you have to be honest with me. You said you'd never do anything like this again. If you don't want to go beyond the kisses, just say so."

"What about you? What do you want?"

"I just realized what I want, Pearl. I want you. But only if you agree, whole-heartedly."

Fighting back the tears, Pearl willed himself to calm down, remaining silent as his heart slowed down, as his breathing grew steadier, as the unease inside him melted away. Cheven's eyes were fixed on him; kind, gentle and patient. He meant every word, Pearl realised, a smile forming on his lips. It was returned, so genuinely that Pearl couldn't help but nod.

"I do," he said, reaching up to touch the buck's face, stroking his finger down Cheven's short, slender muzzle, as he slowly got to his feet. "Let's get out of this water."

Later, the tub gone and the two of them dry, Pearl went to hang up the 'Closed' sign, locking the front door a couple of hours early. It's like Cheven said, he thought, there will be no more customers tonight. He was still naked, and starting to shiver as he made his way back to

Cheven's bedroom. The buck had re-built the fire, which was now blazing hotly, lighting up the room as it chased the last of the moisture away. He met the wolf with a hug, kissing his forehead. Pearl let out a giggle, the light touch tickling him, then allowed himself to be swept off his feet, yelping happily as Cheven picked him up, then placed him on the bed. Shy smiles turned passionate, as they both recognized their longing in the other. They kissed again, eyes closed, hands roaming all over each other as the buck settled down beside the wolf. Cheven's hand moved across Pearl's chest, down his stomach, then further. The wolf mimicked the touch, both soon moaning into the kiss, lust and pleasure sending their minds soaring.

Dawn found them cuddled together, sleeping heavily. The smell of male arousal was heavy inside the room, and the fire had slowly died out. They had made love, over and over again, during the night, only allowing themselves the briefest of rests in between. Waking up slowly, Pearl could remember every kiss, every movement, every ecstatic moment of bliss. He knew he always would. As the night had passed, their loving growing ever more intense, he had felt his fondness for the buck deepen, and now he stroked the dozing face next to him, touching it lightly with love shining from his eyes. It's already morning. The thought brought him out of the still-smouldering afterglow. I'll have to open again in a couple of hours, and Cheven... Cheven has his boat to catch. Feeling detached, Pearl got dressed. He started heating more water, so that the buck could make himself presentable, then he went to prepare breakfast. His thought kept returning to Cheven, like a moth fluttering around a candle. Every time he blinked, he kept seeing the buck's face, kept hearing his voice



crying out with pleasure during the night. While he busied himself with frying sausages and eggs, the kitchen door opened behind him. He felt soft lips touch his temple in a fleeting kiss, and for a second, he couldn't help smiling. But he moved away, returning to his stove while he could hear Cheven taking a seat. The buck said nothing, and Pearl felt grateful for it. Things were easier this way. Every word, every touch would just heighten and prolong the inevitable pain. Serving them both breakfast, he sat down across the table from Cheven, and they ate in silence, taking their good time. After the meal, Pearl moved to clear the table, when Cheven's hand grabbed his, pulling him back down onto his chair.

"Won't you talk to me, Pearl? It was nothing wrong, what we did."

"No. No, it wasn't. I just... I just thought it would be better if you left, without saying anything. That it would be easier to bear, that way."

"I'm not going to leave just like that," Cheven said, trying to meet the wolf's evading gaze. "I really enjoyed this night, Pearl. Really enjoyed being with you. I don't want this to end."

"Neither do I, but you're going away! Even if you visit, now and then, it would be..." Pearl's voice broke, and he felt his eyes brimming with tears. Before he knew it, the words he'd dreaded to even think were on his lips. "I've fallen in love with you, Cheven."

"I know, Pearl." He laughed softly at the wolf's confused looks. "Your eyes talk, my little one. I... I certainly hadn't expected this, but I love you too, Pearl. The rain last night was a good thing."

"Yes, it was." Hesitantly, Pearl leaned across the table and kissed his new-found love. It didn't take long until he was sitting in the buck's lap, the two of them sharing a long, warm embrace. "But it can't last, can it? I mean, our love? If you're leaving..."

"But I'll come back, Pearl. Unless... you want to come with me."

"The tavern..." He looked around. "Mr. Casden isn't due for almost a week. Could you take a later boat?"

"No." Cheven's voice was pained. "Not if I'm to make my claim. It... well, matters were rushed. There are others, standing in line to claim that house, and all that's inside it."

"Then you should leave, Cheven."

"But, I..."

"It will be months before you're back, to wait that long... it's too much to ask! I don't even know if I'll still be around town by then."

"You're just trying to be brave, my love." Pearl opened his mouth to protest, but Cheven put a finger against his lips, silencing him. "Don't lie to me, please. Pearl, do you really think you'll spare us heartache this way? I promise you I'll come back to you. If you don't want me then, I'll just go again. Just don't shut me out."

Unable to speak, Pearl buried his face against the buck's warm shoulder. It felt so right there, he was so perfectly at ease, so able to forget all his worries and

troubles. But he also knew that it wouldn't last much longer. Desperately clinging on to what little time they had left, he kissed the nape of Cheven's neck, earning a slight gasp. Slowly he kissed his way up the buck's neck, until their lips were locked together again, both reluctant to let go. But they did let go, did break apart. And they did get up to leave the table. Pearl cleared away the dishes in a haste, all the while feeling strangely dispassionate, as if he'd already set his mind to the buck's departure. Once he was finished, he went to Cheven's room, where the buck had finished packing his things. Together, they walked to the front door, where the wolf stopped. They shook hands, but as Cheven tried to embrace him, Pearl moved away.

"You'd better go, or you'll miss the boat."

"Don't shut me out, Pearl."

"Come back if you want, but I can't promise I'll be here."

"Pearl, please..."

"Just go." Pearl looked down, avoiding the other's eyes. "Please, just go."

Cheven leaned against the railing, watching as the crew made the ship ready to cast away. He kept stealing glances towards the city, still hoping. Several times, he had almost made up his mind to give up his claim to the inheritance, to get off the ship and head back to the tavern. But Pearl's words had been so... final. The wolf had decided for them to break up, almost before they had got together. Still, he nursed the hope. If Pearl had changed his mind... Cheven knew that if the wolf was to appear, down on the docks, he would just leap ashore, letting all else go. Then the harbour mate gave his call, and the drawbridge was raised. Slowly, sails caught wind, and the ship laid out. Sighing, tears appearing in the corners of his eyes, he looked back at the shrinking harbour, until the entire town had vanished beneath the horizon. When there was nothing more to see, he went back to his cabin, sitting down heavily on the bunk, hiding his face in his palms. So, now what? For the first time in his life, he had fallen in love, and for the first time in his life, he was heart-broken. While hours seemed to pass, he cried himself dry, the tears leaving him with a feeling of emptiness. A void within him that he couldn't fill. Not alone. Lost in his thoughts, the first soft knock on the door passed Cheven by, but the second time, he heard it.

"Who is it?"

"Steward, sir. Room service."

"I ordered nothing. Please go."

"Sir, it comes with the captain's compliments."

Muttering, Cheven went up to open the door, letting the white-clad steward in. Eyeing the newcomer, he felt his mouth opening, refusing to close again. Placing a tray of tea and cookies on the bedside table, Pearl reached out and pushed his muzzle closed.

"Don't drool on the floor, please, sir." Giggling, he hugged the dumb-struck buck tightly, kissing his nose. "Hello, Cheven."

"Hello, Pearl." Slowly, the truth dawned upon the buck, and he returned the hug, fiercely, whooping with joy. "Pearl! What the hell are you doing here!"

"Only my duty, sir. Now, don't look so shocked. I've got a trustworthy friend looking after the tavern for me, it's well off in her hands. But my savings weren't anywhere near enough to buy me a ticket, so I signed up."

"You silly wolf!" Cheven pressed his lips against Pearl's; tears of happiness and joy streaming down their faces, and into their kiss, giving their tongues a salty taste. "I'll see to it that you're fired. I'm paying your fare!"

"But there are no available cabins..."

"This one's a bit tight, but I think we'll manage."

"You think so, eh? It looks very tight." Pearl frowned, acting concerned. "That bunk's far too small for two people."

"It's not."

"Yes it is!"

"Let's try it out, and you'll see, wolfie." Cheven kissed him again. "If you get out of that uniform, the fit will be easier."

"And you get out of your traveling clothes! Those smell!"

Once their clothes were off, they shared one more long, deep, intense kiss, this one their most passionate by far. Cheven gasped as Pearl grabbed his buttocks, pulling him closer. Slowly, they eased their way down on the bunk, all the while showering each other with affection. Like Cheven had said, they fit in, but only by lying side-by-side, or one half on top of the other. Even that was a tight fit, but there was still room enough for the movements that followed. The steady splashing of waves against the ship's hull all but drowned out the sound of happy voices crying out their bliss.

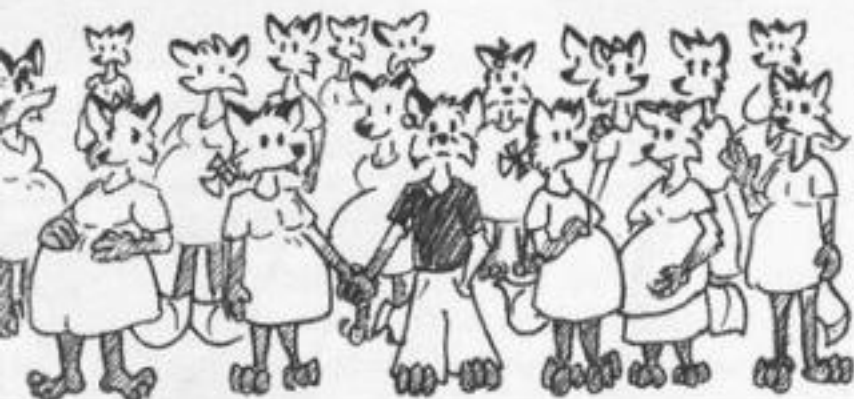
Dawn found them cuddled together, sleeping heavily. Both men had contented looks on their faces, smiling slightly as they twitched and moved while they dreamt. Slowly, Pearl began to wake up, and he stretched his neck to reach up to kiss his lover's cheek. Cheven snuggled up to him, tightening their night-long hug. The buck, too, was beginning to wake up. Pearl watched the deep, brown eyes open, and the drowsy smile that met him seemed to melt away his concerns. Come what may, he would have no fears. No fears at all.

H

"MIGHT I SUGGEST..."

art 'n' writing by Malin

"School children under 16 are being encouraged to experiment with oral sex as part of a Government-backed drive to cut Britain's sky-high teenage pregnancy rate." --REUTERS, Feb. 21, 2003



Now, teen pregnancy is definitely a problem.

And I'm certainly not going to discourage people from trying oral sex.



(Remember, boys, she gets a turn too.)

But I think there's an alternative that isn't being considered by the British Department of Health...



...besides the obvious, I mean.

Kids, why not try being



Did you know that gay people can have sex and NEVER get pregnant? You still get oral sex, and SO much more!



As with any sexual activity, there's a risk of disease--but no risk of unwanted children!

Why wait? Visit your local recruiter today!



Shirley

HIT 12
MISS 48

By Renee Carter Hall

Illos by Aura Moser



GOVERNMENT
MATTERS

Aura 03

Terren struggled to concentrate on the vid-screen console before him. As the flashing triangles approached, he gripped the weapon's controls, aimed the laser sight, and fired. It was the required daily test of speed, accuracy, and coordination—and today's score was the worst he'd gotten since he'd been enlisted.

He was definitely alert—cinnamon haunches tense, long ears and whiskers twitching—but the teasing scent of a female at a neighboring console had stolen his attention. Now he shifted from one position to another in the hard, molded seat, trying to ignore the tightening fabric of his dark green shorts.

He glanced at her. She had just finished her exercise—probably cracking a new code; all females worked in tech-intelligence—and was now pushing the console's controls away from her chair.

In form, she was like everyone else in the room, including himself: bipedal rabbit, descended from engineered hybrids. She wore the same shorts as he, with the tantalizing addition of a matching strip of cloth worn tied over her breasts. The dark color made her white fur glow... Did she even know what she was doing to him? He looked back at the screen and winced: he'd missed a dozen targets.

He managed to take down a few more targets before he looked back at her console. It was empty, but her scent was stronger than ever—

"Hi."

He turned in his chair and saw her standing behind him, her blue-gray eyes glinting with laughter.

She leaned over his shoulder and looked at the screen. "You're not doing too well."

Terren blew out a breath and tried to stay focused. "My score's usually a little higher than this."

"So what's different?"

He hesitated. "You are."

She slid her hands down his shoulders and leaned to whisper in his ear. "Want to go do something about it?"

He swallowed, throat suddenly dry, the exercise forgotten. Command encouraged all privates—all mature personnel, in fact—to be as sexually active as possible, but he'd never found any doe who seemed receptive. Now, though...

He pushed the weapon controls away, automatically stopping the exercise. A short menu appeared asking for the reason, and he paused, reading the list of possibilities—order from superior, official emergency, personal illness...

She reached forward and touched the last one: temporary reproductive leave.

Terren stood, extremely aware of the stiff bulge in his shorts. "Where should we go?"

"My bunk. There's nobody there this time of day."

He followed her through the sterile hallways to the females' wing. Each slow sway of her hips throbbed in him, and each time she passed under the cold overhead lights, her fur shimmered from white to pale gray to

shining silver. They passed a few other privates on the way, but none were headed to the same wing.

She was right. Row after row of spartan double bunks filled the room, each with its green blanket neatly tucked, all of them empty. He was surprised at how similar the bunks looked to the ones in the males' quarters.

He sat on the edge of her bed, unsure what to do next. "Um...what's your name?"

"Leida," she said, casually untying the cloth around her breasts. "And you're Terren, right?"

"How'd you..." He trailed off as she dropped the cloth to the floor, then slid her shorts from her hips. "How'd you know?"

"I'm in tech-intel, remember?" She flashed a smile that was both mischievous and seductive. "I make it a point to find out about guys I'm attracted to."

He chuckled nervously. "What'd you find out?"

She sat down beside him, moved closer, and kissed him slowly. After several moments, she pulled back, just enough that he could feel her breath on his face. "Not as much as I want to know."

She leaned him back onto the bed, laid on top of him, began a kiss that he continued. He couldn't stop running his hands over her sleek curves, couldn't believe how daring and alive and wonderful she was—and she wanted *him*!

She tugged at his shorts. "Let's get these off..."

He stood and let her pull the shorts down to his ankles, and he breathed a sigh of relief and desire as his erection stood free of the tight cloth.

She stopped. Looked up. Stared.

Terren swallowed, wanting to cup his hands over it, to pull the blanket over him, to know why she was looking at him like that.

"Is..." Terren coughed, his voice squeaking. "Is something...um..."

Leida stood. "Boy, somebody sure got the deep end of the gene pool."

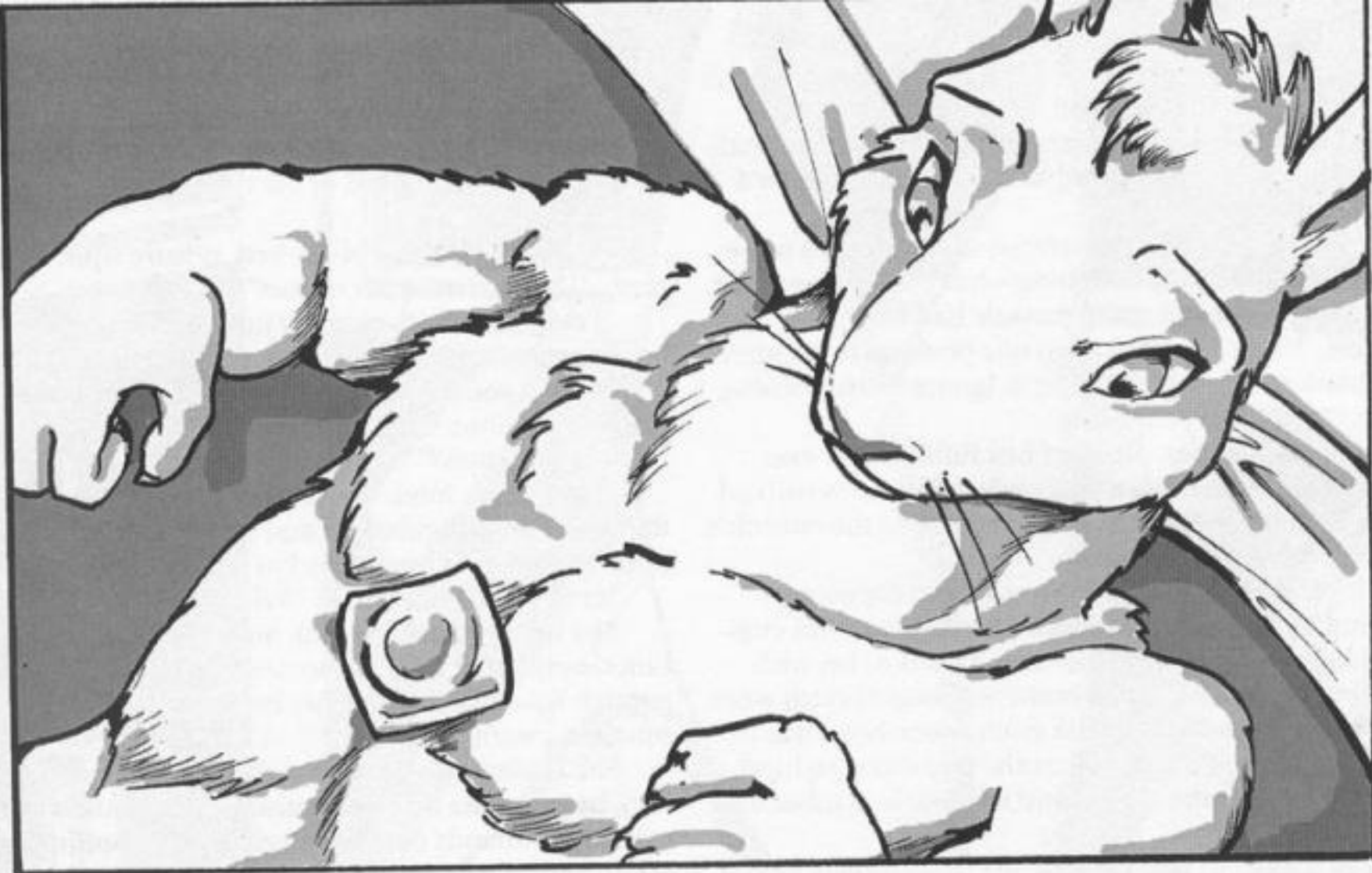
His erection slackened. "What's...wrong with it?"

"Wrong? Nothing." She laughed and ran one finger along its length; he shuddered and stiffened again. "I just meant I haven't seen one this big in a long time, and..." She faltered. "Not attached to someone I liked this well. I know we don't really know each other, but..."

He felt it, too—that sense of rightness, the way he felt when she spoke, as if they were meeting for the hundredth time.

But more than that feeling was the heightening heat of her scent, the sweet musk that blocked out everything else, blocked out the stale scent of the bunk's rough blanket, the low whirr of the air recycling... Everything was fading fast except for her body, his, and the need they both knew.

And then she pulled away. "Just a second," she said, getting up. Terren frowned—was she losing interest?—then saw her searching under her mattress.



She tossed a small packet onto his chest. "Here—put this on."

"What?" He picked it up and squinted at it. "Where did you—" He stopped and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Where did you get this?"

She got back into bed and pulled the blanket over them. "I have my sources. Don't ask. Put it on."

"But if somebody—"

"Shhh." She took it from him, tore open the foil, and slipped the condom's sheath over him. "I'll explain later."

He felt odd wearing something there, and he glanced around to make sure no one had entered the room. Still, delicious shivers coursed through him as he lay on top of her.

"First time?" she murmured.

"Yes..."

"My favorite." She took his hand and guided it between her legs. "Yes... right—oh—right there."

She was already wet, and his fingers slid easily over and inside her labia. Her soft gasps urged him to her clitoris, and he rubbed it lightly as he closed his mouth over one of her nipples.

"Terren," she breathed, "inside..."

Heart pounding, Terren let her guide him inside, forcing himself to go slowly. How right it felt, he thought, right and wonderful and complete, with every sensitive inch of him surrounded by her—this was nothing like the stories he had heard, nothing like the crude jokes his bunkmates swapped, full of suggestive boasts and lewd gestures, this was above all of that, above it

and so far beyond it, their bodies fitting together so perfectly...

She eased him into different positions until he found one that made her gasp with pleasure as well. That was how he wanted it—he wanted her to feel it, too, this rising sense of joy and peace and surrender... He buried his nose in her fur and inhaled that scent that had first drawn him to her, then groaned and realized he was about to come, that he couldn't stop it, couldn't hold back, but she was breathing harder too, and he could feel that she had her hand where they were joined, moving in the same rhythm.

"Yes," she breathed, even faster now, "yes, yes—"

"Leida—" His body tensed and released, and bright lights exploded behind his closed eyes. When the height finally passed, he was left shaken, emptied of years spent alone, all of it poured into their connection. He looked to her, and when her satisfied gaze met his, he knew she felt the same way. He sighed from a mixture of exhaustion and wonder, and then they both were still.

He felt as if he should say something, but he couldn't find any of the right words, so he just kissed her lightly.

She showed him how to withdraw while carefully holding the condom in place. As they rested next to each other, the second cycle chimes began, and when they finished, Leida began to count softly. Puzzled, Terren watched as she counted to twenty, then took the condom from him, got up, and dropped it into a refuse chute on the wall.

"The cameras are off," she said. "We've got about ten minutes to talk before they'll hunt down the glitch."

"Cameras?"

"You didn't know?" Leida climbed back into bed. "All off-duty areas are scanned every second. Except now."

"How did you—"

"Don't ask. Believe me, it'd take a lot longer than ten minutes to explain." She reached under the mattress and held up another condom. "Do you know why we can't have these?"

"They're illegal."

"Not for everybody. Humans buy them all the time. Boxes of them, cheap."

He frowned. "Then why can't we?"

"Because they want us to be good little productive breeders. The more sex they encourage, the more fresh new soldiers they get for their damned war."

"That can't be true."

"Still wet behind those ears, huh? Look, you're going to be on the front lines, of course they don't tell you. Can't risk losing your loyalty—especially not when you're armed."

Terren thought back to what little history he'd learned in training. He knew they'd been bred to be quick, alert in battle, fast on their feet, fast reflexes. He also knew, however hard he tried not to think about it, that the few who survived combat were deafened from the noise, shellshocked into insanity, or missing at least one limb. Still...

"Think about it," said Leida. "You're a scientist researching genetic hybrid possibilities for a high-casualty, economy-draining war. What animal do you choose? One that's perfectly suited for combat, or one that breeds quickly and abundantly? It's not that hard a decision."

"I guess it's possible," said Terren, feeling suddenly uneasy. "But haven't you ever thought—I mean, don't you want...?"

"To be a mother? Maybe someday, but by my choice, not theirs. And..." She sighed. "If they were male, they'd die in the war. If they were female, they'd have the same life I do. No way. Anybody deserves better than that."

She propped herself up on one elbow, shadows spilling over her breasts. "The condoms—they're the ultimate protest. We get what we want, and they don't."

Leida got up, checked the chronometer on the far wall, and pulled on her shorts. "Forty-five seconds. Any last questions?"

Terren blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "When can I see you again?"

She smiled and tied the cloth around her breasts. "Eager, aren't we?"

"It's—I didn't mean I wanted to—I mean, I *would* want to, but—"

"I'll be around." With that, she tossed Terren his shorts and left.



He didn't see her again for a couple of weeks, until they were teamed up for a training exercise. She smiled at him as she slipped on the comm headset, and then he stepped into the adjoining room and the simulation began.

He stood before a field of rough, churned soil. The dark sky was lit only by the laser sights of weapons and distant explosions.

He was alone. That was how it always was in the simulations. He'd heard stories of the confusion in battle and wondered why they didn't prepare him for it. Probably it would be too costly to train them together or program other soldiers.

The goal: to reach the safe-trench on the far side of the field, with the aid of his tech-intel, who—although she couldn't see him—had a computerized vantage point of both his location and the enemy's.

"*Acknowledge transmit.*" Leida's voice in his ear. Once males were grown, they all received audio implants for communication.

Terren checked his weapon and set it to full power. "Transmit acknowledged. Powered and ready."

"*First target, ten o'clock.*"

Terren aimed and fired, dodging the target's blast. The program rewarded him with a hollow-voiced "Target destroyed."

"*Head up the left side—it looks clear.*"

He did—and ducked just in time to avoid a laser-guided bullet. "You're supposed to tell me about those!"

"*Sorry.*" She sounded like she meant it—but after all, this was her training, too, and she'd want to do well.

He kept going, trying to depend on his own senses instead of her commands. In the field there'd be very few situations where he'd have a tech-intel watching his back. Most of the time he'd be on his own.

"*Target—seven o'clock!*"

He had already turned. "Got it."

Cautiously he zig-zagged his way toward the protected trench. "*Dropping the field,*" said Leida. "*Looks like you're home fr—wait—run!*"

He hesitated an instant, then ran and dove into the trench just ahead of the explosion. Somehow she managed to get the force field back up in time to protect him.

"That," Terren panted, "was close." And the battlefield faded around him.

There was the usual debriefing with the expected comments: she should think ahead and be less impulsive to give the all-clear, and he should trust her commands without hesitation. That instant's pause could have meant his life, and often did in the war.

Once they were both dismissed for the morning's free period, she caught up with him on the way out. "Sorry about all of that," she said, gesturing back at the training room.

"If it hadn't been a simulation, that first shot would've at least taken off my ear."

"One of your more expendable parts." She smiled. "We work pretty well together, don't you think?"

"Yeah." He couldn't keep from grinning. "I think we do."

"I thought so." With that, she shoved him against the closest wall and kissed him, exploring his mouth for several heated moments. Terren wasn't sure what turned him on more—the kiss or her daring intensity.

Finally she released. "Your bunk, or mine?"

■ ■ ■

From then on, they met as often as they could. Usually they made love, but only if they were alone or if everyone else was asleep. Occasionally they talked about their training or the war that constituted their entire world. And sometimes they would just lie next to each other, each snuggled into the other's fur, just for the safety and comfort of being close.

One morning, Terren's vidscreen held only a single message. Typically the vidscreen showed the day's orders, summaries of the training, even the menu for the evening meal. Curious, he scanned the text.

TO: PRIVATE, MALE, SERIAL NUMBER 538141

FROM: NORTHAM ARMY, LAG COMMAND
RE: REPRODUCTIVE ACTIVITY

It has come to our attention that, although you have been engaged in frequent intercourse with PRIVATE, FEMALE, SERIAL NUMBER 532716, she has not yet reported for prenatal testing and care.

Please report to building 3J for reproductive screening. Failure to report within twenty-four hours will be considered disobedience of a direct order.

END MESSAGE

■ ■ ■

He got the screening over with as soon as he could. The tests were all normal: normal body temperature, normal sperm count, normal testosterone levels. He wondered if she were reporting to some other building, if she were being tested, too, her footpaws in stirrups, and some doctor probing her...

He'd been reminded that he could ask for more time off-duty, preferably to coincide with her most fertile periods.

He hoped Leida's supply of condoms would hold out.

That evening, Terren cuddled closer to her, her back against his chest, listening to the low rhythms of his snoring bunkmates. Though his muscles ached from the day's training, he was perfectly aware of her sleek body next to his, and the things they might do once everyone was asleep.

He'd been wanting to ask the question ever since she'd come to his bunk more than an hour before. Finally he kissed the base of her neck, then whispered,

"Leida... I got an order this morning... Did they examine you?"

"Very much so." She stretched and rolled onto her back. "Everything's in perfect working order."

She sounded pleased, and when Terren frowned, she added, "Well, it's not much of a protest unless we'd be able to have children."

"Is that all you think about?"

"No. Sometimes I think about you."

"Thanks." He listened for a moment, then kissed her again. "I think they're all out. These guys can sleep through anything."

"My stock's kind of low," she said as his fingers wandered through her fur, "so I thought we'd try something different."

"Different?" He stroked his tongue over her dark nipples.

"Mmm-hmm." She reached up to fondle his ears. "I was thinking oral."

He pulled back. "But—"

"Don't tell me you believe it's perverted and degenerate."

"No... not exactly, but—isn't it dangerous? I mean—you could get sores, or—"

She laughed and touched a finger to his lips. "I forget you only know what they've told you. Just give it a try."

He glanced at her uncertainly, then relaxed and kissed her mouth, her throat, her breasts, nuzzling his way down her body until he reached her inner thighs. She spread her legs a little more, obviously inviting him, revealing her delicate labia, her swelling clitoris.

He kissed the outer lips lightly, hesitantly: she was warm, almost feverishly so, and the skin felt smooth under his lips. She murmured wordlessly and reached fingers down to open herself further.

He dipped his tongue inside and received a heady gasp in reply. He kissed the hardening nub, then took it into his mouth. Every moan intoxicated him, took him farther beyond control.

He grasped her hips, pulled her closer to him, all the time aware of his own growing desire that now throbbed stiffly between his legs. She was panting now, breathing his name again and again. He groaned and buried his muzzle in her damp fur, no longer sure who would come first, and then she bucked hard against him, arching her back, muscles tense, forcing a sudden, intense cry from her throat.

After she relaxed, Terren pulled away, savoring the spicy taste that lingered on his tongue. He rolled onto his back, his erection smoothly vertical, and closed his eyes, remembering that delicious pulsing against his lips—

Warmth enveloped him. "Leida," he breathed, "oh, yes..."

She moved her mouth over him, along him, around him, sometimes suckling steadily only to pull back, then

pull him into her mouth again. He felt swollen and sensitive and ready, so ready...

"Wait," he gasped. "Stop—"

She looked up. "What's wrong?"

He felt sheepish saying it out loud. "I'm—I'm going to come."

Her puzzled frown melted into a smile. "But that's what I want." She slid her tongue up, then down again. "I want you to come," she murmured, "nice and hot in my mouth... I want to taste you... I want to drink everything you've got."

Terren clutched helplessly at the sheets, muscles shuddering. "Then," he managed, "you'd better—get ready—"

He gasped hard and released, the first jet hitting her cheek, the rest surging into her mouth. He felt free, alive, feeling her swallow, feeling his body emptying into her for the first time, with nothing between them to hold it back.

And then the bunk was flooded with bright, sharp light. Leida hurriedly pulled away, wiping her cheek. Terren squinted into the glare but could see nothing.

"On your feet. Present marks."

Both stood instantly. Finally Terren's eyes adjusted to make out the human commander standing before the bunk.

The man passed a scanner over their right shoulders, then glanced at the attached palmscreen. He looked at Leida. "Get dressed and back to your bunk. Orders at oh-six-hundred hours. Dismissed."

Once she was gone, he turned to Terren. "Dress and report to a vidscreen."

"Yes, sir."

The vidscreen showed him what he expected to see—how oral sex interfered with the war, caused disease, fostered unhealthy desires, led to all kinds of sexual problems... They'd shown this to everyone before, but this time, he didn't believe it so easily. It hadn't been unhealthy, it had been wonderful. He realized it all came back to what Leida had said: if the doe can't get pregnant by it, it's unhealthy.

Or illegal. He hoped they wouldn't find any of Leida's supply. A training vid wasn't much to deal with, but what would they do if they found...?

He wasn't allowed much time to worry. His time off-duty was cut to the allowed minimum, and when he viewed his official communications every morning, the vidscreen's first display was a reminder that all mature males should stay in top shape with healthy intercourse.

The first morning of the next week, though, his vidscreen showed something different when he scanned his mark to log on...

HI, 538141.

INTELLIGENCE TRAINING PAYS, HUH?

DON'T TRY TO REPLY. I'LL COME AS SOON AS I CAN—AND THEN WE CAN BOTH COME. ANY WAY YOU WANT.

I LOVE YOU.

Terren stared at the screen for several minutes, even after the message vanished. Of course it was her—he didn't doubt that. It was that sweet, simple phrase she'd closed with... three words that made him feel both anxious and awed, as if he were holding something extremely fragile and indescribably beautiful. He'd wanted to tell her how he felt so many times, in the passion of sex or the silent peace after...

They had to give him some time off. He had to eat, had to sleep. He couldn't spend every moment training—and that meant they could find some time together.

He checked the time, then quickly logged off and reported for duty.

■ ■ ■

"Mmmm..."

"Oh, yes...that's it...oh, you're so *good*..."

Terren pressed his pillow harder against his ears, trying to block out the sounds from a few bunks away. A friend had successfully enticed a very well-endowed female to his bed, and now the two were vocally savoring each thrust and grind of their lovemaking.

Terren tried not to writhe against the bed, even though the pressure felt very, very good. Masturbation, he told himself, was officially discouraged by command, it was absolutely non-productive, it was bad for his health, it would—why wouldn't those two shut *up* already? Then the doe came loudly, her cries bursting into the silence, and after a moment's pause the bedsprings' rhythm started again, and he decided to hell with official discouragement and reached a hand between his legs—

"Having trouble sleeping?"

"Leida." Her name came out as a gasp, half surprise and half need, and then she was climbing into his bed, naked and warm against him.

"I see you've started without me." She kissed him slowly, then whispered, "They're not the only ones around here who can make some noise."

He watched her burrow under the blanket, then felt her lips close around him. He couldn't help moaning as she moved her warm tongue teasingly over his tight length, as her mouth enveloped him again and again. A sweet glow began to build—

She reappeared and grinned at him. "Boy, you're close! Want it slow or fast?"

"What do you *think*?"

"I guess I'll do slow, then. Maybe change the stimulation a bit..." He felt the latex being rolled over him, and then she straddled his hips and eased him inside.

He wished they didn't have to use anything—he wanted to feel her, all of her, wet with need, to fill her with his climax. Still, it was enough to have this, to have her muscles flexing around him, surrounding him with soft, strong warmth.

As she moved on top of him, he thought of all the nights like this one had been, all the nights he'd lain in bed listening to the others making love in their bunks... how he'd rub himself in the midnight darkness, hoping their furious gasps would mask his own. And now, here she was, the tips of her silver-white ears brushing the underside of the top bunk.

Climax came far too soon, but it wasn't as if he could do anything about it. Afterwards, they lay close together under the blanket, and he fondled her gently and slowly until her breath shortened and her body trembled. "Leida," he sighed as she finally relaxed, "I love you, too..."

He slept deeply, so much so that he didn't even wake when she slipped out of his bed and left for her own. When the zero-cycle chimes woke him, he buried his nose in the pillow where her fragrance still lingered and sighed happily, then dragged himself out of bed and into his routine.

Exhausted as he was, he rushed through the required grooming, the bland breakfast that never changed—he didn't even notice the taste today; he had to get to his vidscreen. Maybe she had left another message for him, he thought as he scanned his mark and watched the Northam flag appear on the screen, and maybe she could show him how to send messages back, and then they'd have a way to—

Terren stared at the vidscreen, at the only message it displayed. An icy numbness settled into his stomach.

The next morning. 0600 hours. Departure for duty. Front lines.

He read the message several times, but the words didn't change. The morning's training passed in a haze, each action performed mechanically. With every virtual simulation he entered, he thought about being in the real thing. Just a few months ago, he realized bitterly, he had almost been looking forward to deployment, as the final goal of all his training, the chance to use the skills he'd honed. Now he could only think that he was being sent to die by someone—some high commander, maybe even a computer—that called him by a number, that didn't know he had a name.

He told Leida that evening, going straight to her bunk after the late meal. She was lying on her back, staring aimlessly at the upper bunk.

"They're sending me out tomorrow," he said.

Silence. Finally, "It figures."

Only then did he notice that she looked like she'd been crying. "What is it?"

"Orders from the top. I guess the war isn't going well. Any female who isn't already pregnant... next month they'll be—artificially..." She sighed shakily. "Nobody has a choice, none of us do, never."

He sat down next to her. "What about us? They didn't bring us together. They can't control that."

"That's the only thing," she said. She stood up, raising her voice. "That's the *only* thing! What right do they have to do this to us—impregnate us by order, march us off to die in some war—*breed* us for it in the first place!"

"Leida—"

"Those stupid, arrogant scientists who made us—*made* us!—we'd have been better off if somebody'd bombed the labs. Burned the whole damn place down..."



Somebody should still do it. This place too." She sat back down and started to sob quietly, her shoulders shaking.

"Leida." He held her. "It's... the way it is."

"I know." She caught her breath. "I know, but—not forever. I'll do what I can. I *will*." She laughed dryly and patted her mattress. "Time I stopped keeping these to myself."

"But if they order it—"

"There are ways. Always have been. But... Terren?"

"Yes?"

She kissed him gently, and they settled into each other's arms.

"I don't want them to do that to me," she said.

"I know." He kissed her again and held her closer, trying to soothe himself as well.

Leida pulled away and looked into his eyes. "I want you."

She untied the cloth around her breasts, then idly stroked her fingers through the thick fur of his chest. "Stay with me tonight," she said softly. "This last night..."

They kissed again, far more slowly, far more deeply. It was amazing, Terren thought, how much one could forget this way, their mouths together and bodies languidly responding, moving toward pleasure.

Finally neither could hold back. Terren sat back on his haunches, fully erect now, and waited for her to slip the condom over him. Instead, she pulled him on top of her.

"But—"

"It's okay," she breathed. "I told you—I don't want them to do that to me. I want it to be you."

She gripped his shoulders as he slid inside. "It's the best time," she said. "I checked, I'm ready, everything's ready... I want them to be yours. To be *ours*. Maybe they won't all die in the war." She angled her hips forward in time with his. "Maybe they'll live. Maybe something of us will live."

Together they thrust their bodies closer, moving toward release, toward that sweet white-light bliss that would give them the mercy of forgetting. "Maybe," she panted, "maybe..."

Even love was a kind of defiance, Terren thought. The one thing they couldn't order, couldn't revoke, couldn't control... No matter what happened tomorrow, he realized, they would have this always, this moment and all the ones before. And maybe, just maybe...

Hope and muscles surged. Terren gasped a breath, thrust as deeply as he could, and came.

H

The Quandary

A poem by Marrok Alexander Wolf
Illustrated by Cara Mitten

As I sit and stare into my lager,
I wonder what I desire.
To be man? To be animal?
Do I bother?

To be chained by
my thoughts and
inhibitions?
To be controlled
by instinct?
What is
important? What
is right? What's
my mission?



What is natural? What's to prove?
It's all so unclear, and at the same time all too clear.
It's a stray thought that provokes, and pushes us on,
leading us to move.

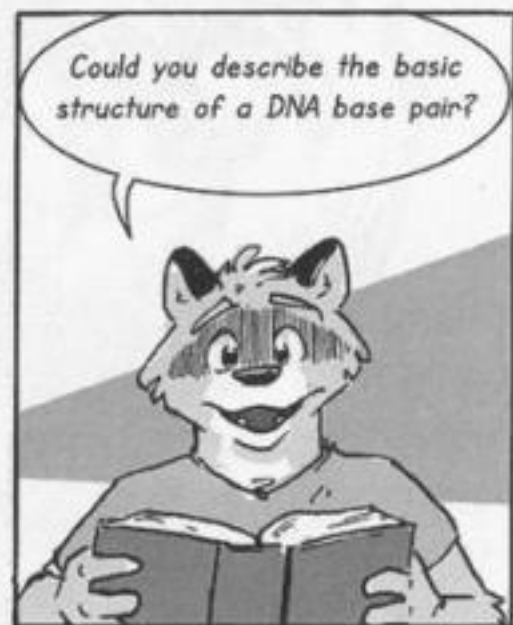
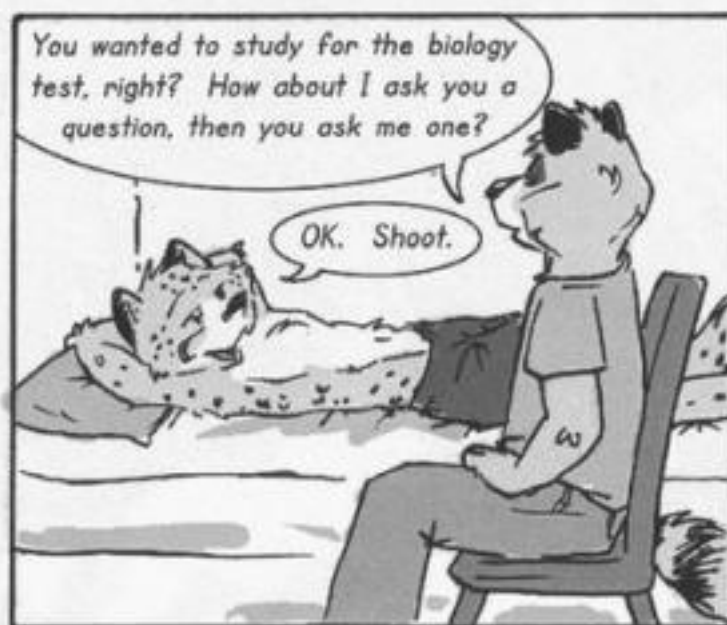
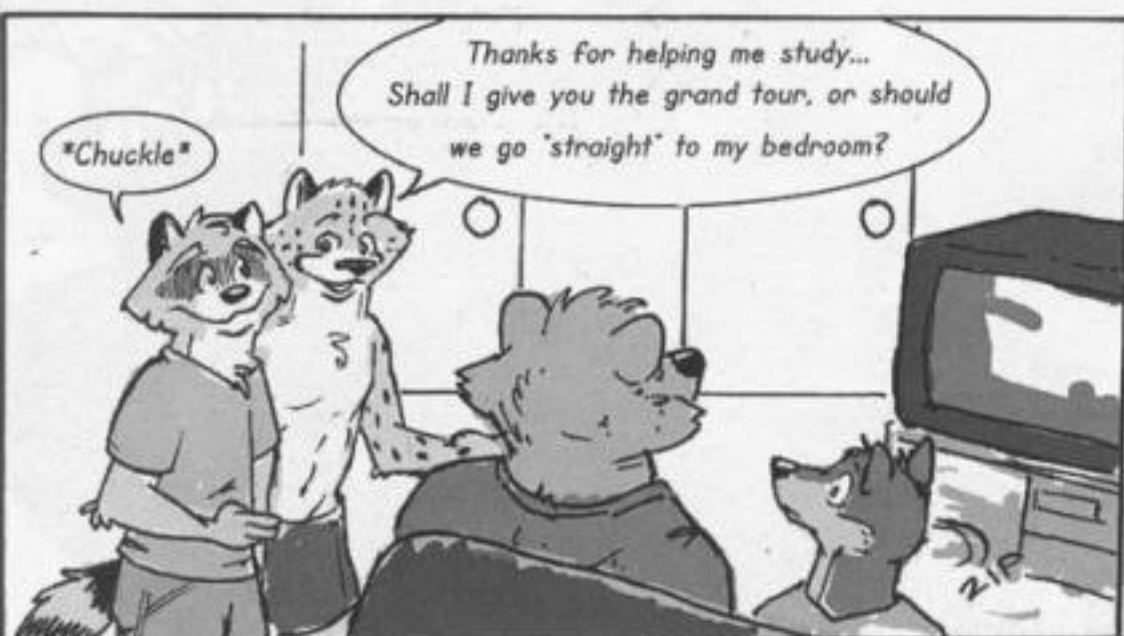


Do I let myself be grounded in the reality of human existence?
Or do I let go, giving in to pure emotions?
Emotions pure, unspoiled? Or do I face a world of grey? Multiplicity and pretense?

It's a quandry I face... we all face in hope.
Give in to the animal? Or be consumed by it?
I don't know the answer, nor does the bottom of my cup.

ClosetCoon

visit us at <http://raccoony.com/closetcoon>



You're right, of course.
But there's nothing to be
nervous about. I just want
to get to know you better.



Relax, and sit over here.
I promise I won't bite!



So you're 'not exactly' seeing
someone... Tell me about him.

Okay.



He's a fox named Colin, and
he's a little taller than me.
He's a nice guy and we've
been for a friends while.



I finally worked up the courage to
kiss him, but I don't think he liked
it. He's seemed uncomfortable
around me ever since.



That's rough, mate. Something similar
happened to me when I lived in Africa.
The first time I had a crush on a guy...



I came on a bit too *fast*.
It didn't quite work out.



Well, if that fox of yours
doesn't want you...

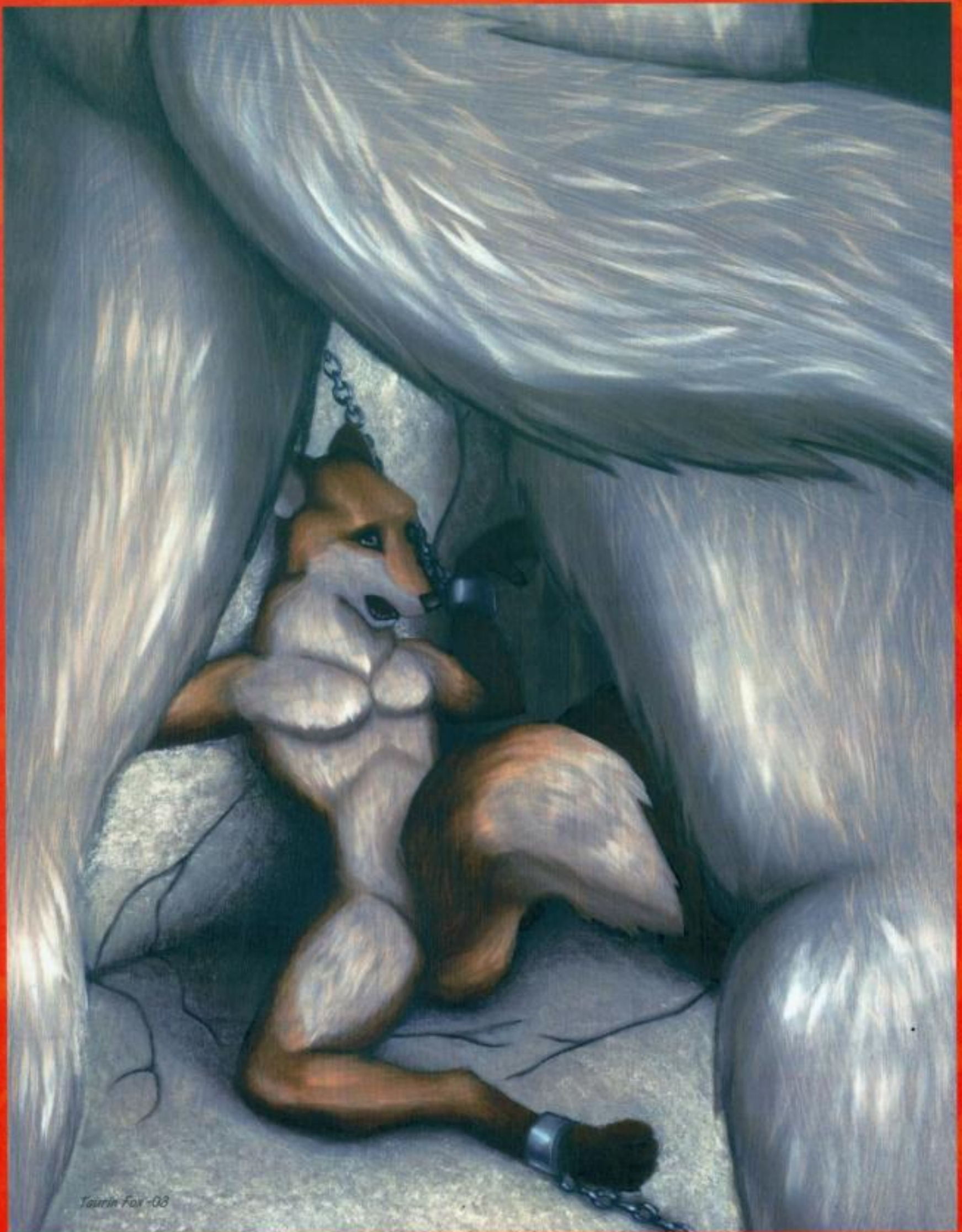


You're always welcome to come here
and hang with me.



THE PRISONER'S RELEASE—PART ONE

BY KYELL GOLD



Taurin Fox '08

Volle raised his head at the creak of the door. Something was different, and in prison, something different could be very good, or very bad.

The guard who stepped into the windowless cell wasn't the grizzled skunk he'd called "Limp Stripes" after the kink in his tail. Limp Stripes had been the only creature he'd seen for the past month, ever since the rat (whose name he knew: Dereath Talison, junior Minister of Defense) had given up interrogating him.

This new guard wasn't carrying a whip, but Volle didn't register that immediately. He was a young white wolf, white all over except for a little streak of black down his left hip that Volle could see clearly because he wasn't wearing a shirt.

He wasn't wearing a shirt.

And he was gorgeous.

Volle stared at the clean lines of his abdomen, nice and tight under his short white fur, up the well-defined chest, and over to the arms that showed muscle even when hanging relaxed at his side. He looked at the streak of black fur, where it disappeared into the olive-drab guard pants, and at the strong legs that filled out those pants nicely.

This can't be real, he told himself. This is a fantasy I'm having. I'm delirious. Next thing this creature will say is that he's here to rescue me.

A glance at the shapely muzzle did nothing to dispel that fantasy. The wolf's expression was carefully neutral. He'd done nothing since closing the cell door behind him except stare back at Volle. Now he slowly lowered his paws to his pants, and started to unfasten them.

Oh. My. Gods.

The wolf's snarl finally dispelled Volle's fantasy.

"That's right, you fox filth. You should've talked under the lash. Now you get to be my plaything."

So that was how it was. Volle watched the pants slide to the ground and stared at the thick white sheath. He could smell the wolf's arousal now, and he thought he could even see a red tip emerging from the top of the sheath. Below the sheath, a full white sac swung around gently as the wolf worked his pants off. His legs were just as perfect as the rest of him: well-muscled and trim. He didn't have more than a couple ounces of fat anywhere on him.

Watching Volle, the wolf moved a paw to his sheath and started to stroke it. "Yeah, stare at it, fox. I'm gonna ...stick this in every hole you have, and when I get tired of those, maybe I'll make some new ones." The words rang hollow; more like a speech he'd memorized than a genuine threat. He was obviously working himself up to it, Volle noted, trying not to get too involved in watching the wolf masturbate. If he'd been here on his own to rape a prisoner, he'd have been fully erect and bursting out of his trousers.

That image made Volle's own sheath stir. He wouldn't have thought it possible, but apparently there were some forces powerful enough to overcome the oppres-

sive cold, dark, and filth of the cell. He shifted to conceal it and watched the wolf's cock extend and harden. This is a move by their side, he told himself. Counter it. But he couldn't distance himself completely, and even as he thought, he found himself getting hard. Well...maybe that would be useful.

The wolf hadn't noticed. He was staring at Volle's muzzle and licking his lips—an obviously forced gesture that almost made the fox chuckle. His eyes were distanced enough that Volle was sure he was fantasizing about someone else. Probably a young bitch he knew. Certainly not a filthy, emaciated fox in shackles, even if he were into bondage.

Finally, the wolf dropped his paw. He let Volle have a look at the long, hard cock between his legs, then stepped forward with a menacing grin. "Ready or not, here I come."

Volle let his muzzle hang open. "Oh, put that in here big boy." His voice was rusty from disuse, but he thought that added a certain something.

The wolf stopped. He looked uncertainly at Volle, registering for the first time that the fox was aroused too.

"Come on, please. I bet I can fit it all in. It's pretty big, but I like that."

"You don't understand, fox. I'm going to put this wherever I want. I'm raping you."

Volle hid a grin. "Oh, okay." His paws were shackled to a single chain that was fixed into the wall, so without much difficulty, he turned over and got onto his paws and knees. He lifted his tail as far as he could, which was just enough to give the idea. "I like it there, too."

The wolf didn't say anything, but Volle could hear him breathing. He heard two more steps, and then felt a strong paw on his tail, lifting it up. He was sure his bare, soiled rear was not a very appealing sight or smell. Turning his head, he gave the wolf an encouraging smile. "Go ahead," he said. "It's your duty, after all."

He was pleased to see that the wolf's erection had slid back significantly into his sheath. The wolf looked at him and held his tail for another moment, then threw it down with a curse and stalked back to the door.

Volle turned back over and watched him pull his pants on, admiring the nicely shaped rear and the white fluffy tail. The wolf kept his back to him and left the cell without a backwards glance. Volle heard the familiar click of the key in the lock, and then all was quiet.

He sagged back against the wall. Was this a one-time ploy or a first salvo? It was a good shot, whichever it was. Dereath, obviously, was behind it, but Volle didn't want to give the rat too much power in his mind, so he imagined a cadre of faceless tormentors who knew just what he was attracted to, and exploited it expertly. Unbidden, visions of the perfect white body with the one distinguishing black streak came back to him, standing in front of him aroused. His sheath, which had lost its arousal, swelled again and he felt his cock pushing to get out. He tried to keep it down—the bastards had shackled his arms and legs so he couldn't give himself release—

but he couldn't get the image out of his head. In his mind, the wolf was smiling, walking towards him with a sway in his step so that his lovely long cock swung from side to side enticingly. Volle could see the soft white sac, the sheath above it stretched to its limit, and the red slick length protruding from it, as though they were all inches from his muzzle. His tongue flicked out; he panted, moaned, and realized he was uncomfortably hard.

The vision in his mind smiled, standing astride him, and lowered that rump onto his cock. He could feel the warmth, the tight embrace, but it did no more than increase his frustration. With a cry, he rolled over and pressed into the cold stone floor, rubbing back and forth. It eased some of his tension, but it also hurt, and he realized quickly that he would never come to climax that way. Panting, he lay there, listening to the trickle of water running through his cell, and then forced himself to turn back over and look around.

He was shackled to the far left hand corner of the cell. There was another set of shackles on the right hand side, empty and rusted. His movement was extremely limited, but he could reach the narrow channel running down the middle of the cell. From the wall near him, water flowed down into the channel; that was his drinking water, and the channel was his toilet. In the center of the ceiling was a small black hole from which he fancied he could feel a breeze sometimes (when the door was open), and beneath that, suspended from a chain, was a small torch whose smoke disappeared up into the blackness. In the center of the far wall, the only door to the cell stood, closed and locked.

Apart from him and the shackles, the only other thing in the room was the plate they'd put his food on. It was formless glop, and he had to lick it off the plate like a savage because they wouldn't give him any utensils. Not after the incident with his first guard, a careless rat who Volle had named Slacker.

He wondered whether he'd see the wolf again. He'd only had the two guards; he was not a normal prisoner and they undoubtedly wanted to limit association with him. He hoped he'd see the wolf again. Besides being attractive, he was young and easier to manipulate than Limp Stripes, who did his job with mechanical precision, or Slacker, who just didn't care. Streak, that would be a good name for the wolf, with his undressing and that cute black streak down his hip. His sheath throbbed with the thought of the wolf, and he sighed. The best thing he could do was to go to sleep, and hope that a dream would bring him the release he couldn't give himself.

It didn't, of course. His sleep was black and dreamless, as it had been for the several months or so he'd been in prison. And in the morning, Limp Stripes was back with his early meal, taking the empty plate and set down the full one without a word. He replaced the torch, as he did every morning (Volle didn't know if it was really morning outside; morning was when he got a new torch), and then left.

Volle ate the small portion of food—some mishmash of stale bread and bean paste today—and tested the shackles with a series of arm exercises. He had tried to do them every day, though his strength was definitely declining; the last time he'd been out of the shackles had been two months before, the last time Dereath had tried to question him.

When he was too tired to keep moving his arms, and the shackles still held fast, he thought about his companions. At some point, he must have realized that they'd given up on him, but he couldn't remember when he'd made that transition. Not when he'd missed the first meeting after his capture, but when he'd missed the second, they must have known that something was amiss. He missed them all: Tella the fiery weasel, as bold a fighter as there was; Sherr the porcupine, their master tactician; Reese the hare, Volle's friend and former roommate, now under cover as a merchant in Divalia; and Seir the mouse, Volle's favorite, who took care of all of them. Seir could become almost invisible when she wanted to, sneaking around markets or an enemy camp, but even if she could become truly invisible, she couldn't help Volle now.

Rescue was no longer a realistic hope, if it ever had been. These prisons dated from the days of King Bucher, and Volle cringed to think that Bucher had been a fox like himself. Hundreds of workers had died excavating the prisons, and hundreds of Bucher's enemies had died inside the completed prisons afterwards. They were not exactly escape-proof, but they were daunting enough that a prisoner couldn't hope for any help from outside. Even if that help were—but Volle stopped himself from even thinking the name. His contact within the palace would have helped him by now if he'd been able. He had tried to wipe the name from his mind, so that even under torture he wouldn't be tempted to cry it out.

He'd sworn he would take the name to his grave, and now he wondered how far he was from that end. The ploy with Streak smacked of desperation, and if they'd realized that nothing would work, they had nothing to gain by keeping him alive. Well, then, he would die an unsung hero. Or at least an unsung patriot—he wouldn't be a hero unless he got the information he had back to his people.

Dispirited but resolute, he looked around the cell again and sniffed the air. The cells were not cleaned out—ever—leaving the scents of each prisoner's unfortunate predecessors to demoralize him. Volle had been in this cell for two months now, and could no longer smell the bear and horse that had been the most recent occupants. There was nothing but his own rank scent to his nostrils, and he wondered how long it would linger when he was gone.

Limp Stripes was back again with the evening meal, and Volle saw nobody else for the next day. But after the evening meal that day, as he was holding his tail trying to brush the matted fur with his claws, the door opened again, and Streak walked in.



Taurin Fox-02

He was scowling, and wasted no time on preliminaries. He stripped his pants off, but before Volle could open his muzzle, he shook a finger at him. "Not a word, fox, or I'll...smash your muzzle into the wall." The threat came with some hesitation, and nowhere near the force it needed to be effective. Volle noted that, like last time, Streak wasn't fully erect, but he strode toward the fox anyway. With a rough push, he flipped Volle onto his stomach.

The shackles clattered as Volle nearly fell, but retained his balance. He felt a paw yank his tail upward, and he pushed his rump in the air. Streak hesitated, and Volle took a chance. "Please," he moaned. "It's been so long."

"Shut up, I said." But the wolf didn't move.

"It's been months since I got laid, and you're so sexy," Volle went on. "Come on, stud. Do me." He thrust his rump backwards and panted.

The paw tightened around his tail, and for a moment he felt the wolf's fur brush his rump. The touch

was somewhat arousing, but he managed to keep from thrusting back any more. No need to overdo it.

"Dammit!" the wolf yelled, letting go and standing up.

Volle heard Streak pace back towards the door. He turned over cautiously, watching the wolf get into his pants. This time, Streak turned and met his eye as he pulled his pants up over his rump, and Volle thought he saw confusion there. But it was dark, and he could have been mistaken.

Streak's scent, though, lingered in the cell, and Volle inhaled it greedily. It was young and earnest, and yes, there was a bit of predator in it, but there was also confusion and innocence. It reminded Volle of his own scent as a younger fox, and it reminded him of another young soldier he'd known, years ago, who had died for his beliefs. He held it to himself as he drifted into another night, a reminder that he was not alone.

The next time Streak visited him, he opened the door, closed it, and then sat with his back against it,

facing Volle. He wore a loose shirt this time, the same color as his pants, and made no move to unbutton it or the pants. He stared at the fox until Volle broke the silence.

"Don't I get a show today?"

Streak shook his head slowly.

"Pity. Aren't I a good audience?"

The wolf's scowl deepened.

"Well, why are you here, then?"

Streak looked away from him, idly glancing around the cell.

"Can I offer you a drink?" Volle gestured at the trickle of water coming down the wall beside him. "I don't want to be a bad host."

This time he was sure he caught the flicker of a smile at the corner of the white wolf's muzzle.

"Oh, come on," he said. "You told your boss that the rape went well, that I was demoralized, that you could get some information out of me. So they keep sending you back for more. Well, you'll never get information if you don't talk to me."

Streak was staring at him. "H—how did you know..."

"I'm not stupid. You obviously weren't all fired up to do it, and now you're just killing time so it looks like you're in here abusing me. You wouldn't have come back if you were doing this on your own. So your boss must have sent you back in, ergo he thinks it's going well, ergo you didn't tell him otherwise."

The wolf thought that over for a moment, then looked up at Volle. "What's 'ergo' mean?"

Volle smiled. "Therefore."

"Well, you're a traitor, ergo I don't have anything to talk to you about." Streak fixed his gaze pointedly on the other set of shackles.

Volle leaned back against the wall. "First of all, I'm a patriot. And second, I'm dead anyway, so what does it matter?"

"If you'd just cooperate, then you wouldn't be dead. They would move you to a nicer cell, maybe even let you go."

Volle barked a surprised laugh that ended up being a racking cough. "I thought you were a little young to be on prison duty. First tour, isn't it? What, you have an uncle with the King's ear, didn't want his nephew hacked to bits on the battlefield?" When Streak didn't answer, he went on, "Or maybe you have a patron, someone who didn't want his little sex toy all chewed up."

"Shut up!" The wolf leapt up, then stopped himself. "I'm nobody's toy." He sat down again and glared.

"Well, someone pulled strings to get you on prison duty this young."

"Why do you keep saying that?" Streak was snarling, but Volle could see some confusion in his eyes again.

"I've seen prison guards. They're all veterans who've been through battles. Prison duty is easy. It's a reward. Not only are you young, you're also hopelessly naïve about what goes on here."

Streak shook his head. "I was chosen for duty by Minister Fardew himself. Top of my squad unit in drills."

"Drills." Volle coughed another laugh. "And your first duty was to come rape a prisoner?"

The wolf's white ears flickered uncertainly. "He said the other guards refused to do it. He said they wanted someone younger and energetic, more..."

Volle watched his muzzle drop as he trailed off, and smiled despite himself at the guard's self-consciousness. In a pub, it would be adorable. "More virile?" Streak didn't say anything. "Well, you are that. No question."

He drew out the last couple words, and Streak glanced at him. "Why did you say I'm naïve?"

"Because you think I have a chance of getting out of here alive."

"They said—"

"They're playing on your sympathies. The only thing keeping me alive is that I'm not cooperating."

"No. Maybe that's how they do things in your kingdom, but here we keep our promises."

Volle looked at the earnest muzzle and didn't have the strength to argue any more. "You're probably right." He turned to the wall.

Streak got up, dusted off his clothes, and walked out.

Volle watched the door after the wolf left. He lay down on the cold floor, trying to sleep, but he kept asking himself how long they were going to keep him alive. By now they knew he wouldn't respond to pain; what else would they try? He was pretty well versed in most interrogation techniques, but he didn't know everything. The chains of his shackles lay on the stone beside him, and he wondered, not for the first time, if he could wrap them around his neck and strangle himself. The thought circled his head and then he drove it out. Not yet.

■ ■ ■

"What do you do when you're not pretending to rape me?"

Streak grinned—a definite grin, this time. "Guard duty on the top floors. I only come down here for special duty."

"Tough duty." Volle shook his head.

"Only the best can do it."

Volle chuckled softly. "What do the other guards think of that?"

Streak paused for a moment, then shrugged. "We don't talk much. They're all older. Like you said." He tilted his muzzle. "How old are you?"

Volle instinctively went defensive. "What does it matter?"

"I was just curious." He looked away, as he always did when he didn't know what else to say.

The quiet in the cell bothered Volle less when he was alone. When Streak was here, he felt that the quiet was a waste of an opportunity, or a waste of something. He had no contact with anyone except Limp Stripes, and that could barely be counted as such. He couldn't stay quiet for long. "How old do you think I am?"

Streak measured him with his eyes and then shrugged. "I'd say about a hundred from how you look now. Probably forty?"

"You're not out of your teens, are you?"

"I turned twenty two months ago." Streak settled back, smiling smugly. "So you're not right about everything."

"You joined pretty late. Aren't most male cubs conscripted at sixteen?"

"Usually. I got an exemption. My father died and I had to run the farm."

"Sorry to hear that. How did it happen?"

Streak shifted his gaze again. "Fits. He got bit by something and then it started a couple weeks later. We had to tie him up by the end of it."

"I'm sorry," Volle said again. "How old were you?"

"Eight."

"You were running the farm when you were eight?"

"My mom helped. It was just the two of us."

"That's pretty impressive." Volle watched the wolf get up to leave, and couldn't resist asking one more thing.

"Who's running the farm now?"

"Jasper. Mom's new mate." The tone and the droop of his tail said more than those four words did. He stepped through the door.

"Hey!" Volle called, and then coughed from the strain on his throat.

Streak poked his head around the door. "What?"

"Twenty-six." The wolf didn't move, wreathed in shadow from the dying torch. "I'm twenty-six. Nice, huh?"

He couldn't read Streak's expression as the wolf slowly withdrew and closed the door.

A farm-wolf, eh? That explained the physique, and the naivete. Volle thought again, if only we'd met somewhere else. In a pub, in a bath, in the army...his eyes drifted shut, and in the darkness he saw the naked wolf again, reclining in a bath. He saw himself stepping into the bath next to the wolf, clean and well-groomed. Their paws reached out, touched each other's chest, then moved lower...

He gasped, stifling a moan. His cock was fully exposed again, straining against his sheath, and the frustration was like a coiled spring inside him. He growled and tried to bend his head forward to lick himself, but the shackles prevented even that. Panting, he flipped over and pressed his erection into the cold floor. That discouraged it, though he couldn't help rubbing it against the stone, gasping in relief even as he winced at the abrasions.

Was this their game? Sexual frustration? Tie him up so he couldn't pleasure himself, then torment him with a gorgeous wolf, physically perfect, cute and seductive, until he begged for release? He clenched his teeth and swore that he wouldn't let that happen. *I should've just let him take me, the first time*, he thought. But he knew even as he thought it that he couldn't have done that. It would have given them power over him.

But oh, he wanted it so badly.

■ ■ ■

Streak had questions ready the next time. "Aren't you a little young to be a spy?"

"What did they tell you about me?" Volle was wary, as usual. Streak's visits were erratic, and as they were not on his own schedule, they must be on someone else's. He was trying to determine the pattern between them. This one was the very next day, the first time he'd visited two days in a row.

"That you are a traitor who was captured stealing valuable plans of troop movements. That you're in the employ of the Ferrenians."

"I'm loyal to King Rachlas Ferren, but I've always been. I'm not a traitor."

"What was so important about the troop movements that you risked your life for them?"

Volle studied him, and then chose his words carefully. "Do you know about the Pax Valleris?" Streak shook his head. "It's an agreement Tephos and Ferrenis entered into some fifty-odd years ago. It divides the Reysfields plains evenly between them. I heard rumors in the palace that the king was planning to break the Pax and I didn't think that was right. So I went to see if the plans were true. They were. I was chased from the office and captured. The plans were gone and they blamed me."

"Did you take them?"

Volle shrugged. "Go ask your bosses."

"We wouldn't break a peace. Not without a good reason."

"Like a poor harvest in the Reysfields?"

Streak's eyes glinted in the torchlight. "Like the Ferrenians moving first."

"You can check that too, if you like. Maybe they've done something in the last month. But last I heard, they were just fortifying defenses around the plains. Neither side is allowed to have armies on the plains."

"I will check it." Streak stared stubbornly at Volle. "What information do they want from you?"

Volle shrugged. "I don't know."

"Now I know you're lying. They must have asked you."

The conversation was treading too close to dangerous waters for Volle's liking. "Are those your new orders? Get information from the fox with kindness?"

Streak recoiled, but he didn't look away this time. "No," he mumbled. "I was...just curious. I don't know what could be that important to them. Or to you."

"I love my country and my King," Volle said, "and my life is worth nothing to me if it would be better spent in their defense. Don't you feel the same?"

"I...I suppose so..."

"Let's hope you never have to test it."

There was a lengthy pause, then Streak said, "No, I want to test it. I mean, that's why I'm a soldier."

"Aren't you a soldier because they made you one?"

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"Now I know you're lying. They must have asked you."

The conversation was treading too close to dangerous waters for Volle's liking. "Are those your new orders? Get information from the fox with kindness?"

Streak recoiled, but he didn't look away this time. "No," he mumbled. "I was...just curious. I don't know what could be that important to them. Or to you."

"I love my country and my King," Volle said, "and my life is worth nothing to me if it would be better spent in their defense. Don't you feel the same?"

"I...I suppose so..."

"Let's hope you never have to test it."

There was a lengthy pause, then Streak said, "No, I want to test it. I mean, that's why I'm a soldier."

"Aren't you a soldier because they made you one?"

"No." He shook his head. "I could've stayed on the farm, or taken a trade in town. I was past the age of conscription."

"Why didn't you stay on the farm?"

Now, he did look away. "My mom was okay without me. And you know, I'm too old to be living at home."

"Is that what he told you?" Volle spoke gently.

Streak nodded. He looked down at the ground.

"I don't think much of your stepfather, then," Volle said, with more feeling than he had thought himself capable of.

The wolf just flicked an ear, and said, "I'd better go."

Volle watched him go, watched the door close, and settled back against the wall. Poor kid, he thought, and set to grooming his tail again.

It was five long days before Streak appeared again. Volle had gotten fidgety by the third day, and on the fifth was almost tempted to ask Limp Stripes if something had happened to the young wolf. He bit his tongue just in time. That's what they wanted him to do: get attached, pine away for him.

His body wasn't helping him much, either. It seemed every time he closed his eyes, he could see that white shape, highlighted by the flickering torch. The curve of his chest, the bulge in his arms and legs, and the large white ridge of fur between his legs, with the thick red cock standing proudly above it. Volle envisioned all kinds of positions, most starting with the wolf just wrapping his strong arms around him and pressing that firm body against his. The dreams went on from there, and though he tried to avoid moaning his frustration, sometimes it was just too much. It was worst after he'd eaten, when he didn't have hunger pangs to distract his lust. Amazing that with his cramped, weak arms, his matted and dirty fur, and his imminent death, he could still be so aroused by a dream. He wondered whether at some point the basic urges of life were all that would be left to him.

On the fifth day, after he'd eaten the evening meal, the images returned unbidden to him and he was almost trembling with suppressed desire. He clenched his fists, then pulled all his chains to their fullest extent and let out a loud scream of frustration, then fell back to the floor, panting.

"What's going on here?" He hadn't heard the door open, but Streak was standing over him, a halo of weak torchlight around him. His expression was hidden in shadows, but his tail was twitching as though he were worried.

"Oh. Nothing. Sorry." Volle looked up at the wolf, and saw the slight shift of the muzzle as it examined his prostrate form, from his flattened ears down his gaunt, heaving chest, down to his tense and painfully obvious erection. "Uh..." He tried to swing his bedraggled tail around to cover himself, with only partial success.

"It's okay." Streak sounded amused. He walked back to the door and sat down. "Thinking of your mate?"

"Don't have one." Volle regretted the admission as soon as he said it, but then decided it couldn't hurt.

"So what do prisoners fantasize about?"

"I missed you." He'd wanted to sound coy, but there was too much raw emotion in his voice for that.

Streak's ears snapped up. "What, Gerrold isn't enough company for you?" He tried to keep his tone light, with more success than Volle'd had, but the fox thought he could detect some emotion there, too.

"Is that his name? I call him Limp Stripes."

Streak laughed, for the first time Volle had heard. It was a clean, happy sound, and brought a smile to Volle's muzzle. "Why do you call him that?"

"His tail has a kink in it. I think. Plus, I've never seen him get excited or interested in anything."

"I don't think I have either. Limp Stripes. I'll remember that." He inclined his head. "What do you call me?"

"What's your name?" Volle countered.

"What do you call me?" the wolf repeated, and Volle could swear his tail wagged slightly.

Volle hesitated. "Well, it was a tough choice between Gorgeous and Cute Butt."

Streak's ears flicked. "So? Which is it?"

"I don't think I want to tell you." Volle felt suddenly embarrassed.

"Aw, come on." Streak walked over to him and knelt beside him. He pulled Volle's tail away and brushed his erection with a paw. "I'll—"

He didn't get any further. The touch was electrifying; Volle jerked away from it, panting, and stared at Streak with wide eyes. "That's how you're going to get me? Tease it out of me with sex?"

The wolf had retreated and now crouched two paces away. "No! I didn't mean...I mean, I forgot. I'm sorry, really!"

Still panting, Volle relaxed slightly. He couldn't say anything, torn between his vigilance and his fantasies, which were now so close that he wondered if he were dreaming. Then Streak spoke again, and he was sure he was.

"Listen, I'll prove I didn't mean anything. Just...settle down, okay?" He inched closer, holding his paws out placatingly. Volle tried to stay calm, but his nerves were frayed and he didn't know if he could stand it. Streak was only an arm's length from him, and he couldn't back up any more; the stone wall pressed against his back. The wolf's scent was strong, filling his nostrils and adding to his confusion. He barely heard Streak say, "I'm not asking for anything, okay? I'll just do this and leave."

Volle understood a moment before he felt the warm paw close around his cock again. He closed his eyes and moaned. Oh God, it was better than he'd dreamed. He tried to force himself to relax, but his body was tensing despite him, and the wolf had barely moved his paw up and down twice. He was going slowly, and Volle's hips, acting without his consent, pushed into his paw, forcing the rhythm faster. Sensations coursed through him that he'd almost forgotten, electric currents pushing at his

muscles and lifting his fur. His head pressed back against the wall as his breathing came faster, and he strained at the shackles as he finally reached the climax he'd been dreaming about.

It seemed to go on forever, and he lay immersed in it, floating in the waves of ecstasy. As they subsided, he slumped back against the stone floor, and he felt the warm paw unwrap itself from his spent erection. Dimly, he was aware of the opening and closing of the door, but nothing else aside from the strong scent of his musk penetrated his senses before he fell fast asleep.

He could still smell the musky scent of sex the next day, when Limp Stripes came in to drop off the morning meal and change the torch. The skunk's nose might have wrinkled, or maybe he imagined it. He didn't care. He was relieved, relaxed, and felt better than he had in weeks. It wasn't just the release of more than a month of sexual frustration. He was looking forward to seeing the wolf again, actively now, rather than thinking about his situation or his companions. That was what they wanted, he knew, but he didn't care.

Streak occupied his mind on and off for the next five days, during which he waited patiently every evening. His fantasies recurred, but without the intense frustration he'd felt earlier. He had the memory of that night to hold him over, and when he replayed it in his head, he felt the response in his sheath. His erection was not one of urgent need, however, but of a warm diffuse pleasure.

When the wolf did reappear, Volle sat up and smiled. Streak closed the door and walked across the cell, sitting down next to him. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "They didn't send me back until tonight. I asked, but they wouldn't let me."

"It's okay." Volle smiled, enjoying the young wolf's scent and proximity.

"Looks like you didn't miss me quite as much." Streak gave him a warm smile.

"Oh, I missed you. It's just not showing as much." "Really?"

Volle nodded. "I wish...I wish we'd met somewhere else." He voiced the thought hesitantly. It sounded awkward, not as he'd been thinking it in his head, but he couldn't stop now. "We might have been friends. Maybe more." The last part slipped out before he could stop it, and he fumbled to recover. "I mean, if you're interested. I don't know if you like males, or have a mate, or what..."

Streak shook his head. "No mate." He hesitated, and then touched Volle's paw. "And...I do. But, no offense, you kind of look like shit."

Volle grinned. "I feel like shit. But I clean up nice."

"I bet." He paused, ears flicking, and then went on. "Hey. You know something?"

Volle shook his head. "What?"

"I...I missed you, too." He said it bashfully, in a low voice. "I kept wishing I could come down and talk to you. Nobody else really cares. They ignore me, or they call me 'pretty boy' when they think I can't hear."

"Well, you know, I'm pretty much a captive audience."

Streak laughed softly. "I guess so. But I wish...I wish we'd met somewhere else, too."

Volle smiled, flicking his ears. "Do they still think you're raping me?"

"I guess so. De—my boss just asks how the session went and if you're any closer to giving out information and I say," here he put on a rough voice, "yeah, I can break that fox, just give me time."

Volle's rough laugh turned into a cough. Streak tilted his muzzle. "Are you sick?"

"Oh, nothing a couple months relaxing in the sun wouldn't cure." He coughed again.

The wolf was quiet for a moment. "I could see about getting you transferred...or getting out once in a while."

"No. Don't put yourself in danger for me." Volle edged a little closer to Streak. "Tell me about your farm."

"We had four fields, all corn. There were two plows, and my mother and I both used them. We had three horses, one that we got to replace Jenny. She was my favorite, but she was pretty old. The other two were foals from Gerta, our old mare who died about six, seven years ago. We named them Gerry and Geena, and the one we got to replace Jenny was a pretty mare named Tanya. Gerry and Tanya were good plow horses, but Geena hated being hitched up. She liked to be ridden, though, especially if you let her gallop..."

Volle closed his eyes and let the words wash over him. He felt he was standing on the porch of the farm, looking out at the cornfields, watching Streak ride by on a beautiful bay mare. He felt the sun on his fur and the wind through his tail, and he smiled.

"...I loved going to market because of all the things that were there. My dad used to buy me maple candy there, but after he died, I didn't want it anymore. Last year we made enough from our corn to replace one of the plows."

He was beaming proudly when Volle opened his eyes. "That's impressive," Volle said, though he didn't really know whether it was or not.

Streak nodded, his tail wagging behind him. "Anyway. I'd better go. See you soon."

"I'll miss you," Volle said impulsively as the wolf got up.

"Me too." Streak smiled warmly, and walked out the door.

So there it was. He was falling into their trap. He couldn't help it, and he didn't care. At some point, when he didn't expect it, there would be a new face at the door, or maybe Limp Stripes would be the one, and he would be told that for the simple price of a piece of paper, or a name, he could see the white wolf again. If he held out, they would bring him cloth with Streak's scent, to remind him what he was missing. It would be painful, but he could hold out. And then they would try something else.

He was sure he could hold out. Sure, he'd had plenty of good friends, plenty of lovers, but he'd learned (*the hard way*) to keep himself unattached. That was partly what made him a good spy. But you've never been this lonely before, part of his mind cautioned. Never been confronted by this situation. It doesn't matter that you know exactly what they're doing. They know how people work and they know how *you* work, and you're working exactly the way they think you will.

"I can hold out," he insisted, and then realized he was talking out loud.

And what if you can't? What then?

■ ■ ■

Streak was holding something behind his back when he returned, three days later. "What do you have there?" Volle asked as the wolf walked toward him.

Streak knelt down just across the channel in the floor and his ears flicked. He was grinning. "Close your eyes."

"Oh, I can smell it..." Volle closed his eyes anyway, and opened his muzzle. A few small cubes landed on his

tongue, soft and thick. Meat! Chicken pieces, with some kind of sauce on them. He chewed ecstatically, letting the rich taste fill his head before swallowing. "Mmm. Oh."

"There's more." Streak was holding a pawful of chicken pieces. He placed them in Volle's muzzle a few at a time, smiling as the fox gobbled them down. "They really don't feed you much, do they?"

"Mmm. Just enough to keep me alive. All the same tasteless crap. This is so good."

"It's not, really."

"To me it is." He looked longingly at the wolf's empty paw, then stretched his shackles to lean over and lick the sauce from it. Streak twitched, but kept his paw steady until Volle had licked it clean.

As the fox raised his muzzle, Streak raised his paw to brush its underside gently. Volle looked at him and gave his paw another lick. "Thank you."

"There's more." Streak winked, reaching into his shirt pocket.



"More?" Volle stared in disbelief as the wolf's paw emerged with a thick slab of cake wrapped in a cloth napkin. He felt saliva pooling in his muzzle at the rich smell.

"Here, take a bit at a time..." Streak fed him the cake, piece by piece, and when he was done Volle licked his paw again.

"Thank you. Again. You didn't have to."

"I know. I wanted to. I can smell what they feed you. At least this is something nice I can do."

"You're too nice." The heaviness in Volle's stomach from the rich food was turning to unease, but he tried to ignore it.

"I like seeing you enjoy it."

"Glad to oblige. Were you...always this nice?" The turmoil in his stomach was getting worse. He just hoped he could keep it down until Streak left.

The wolf's ears flicked again, and he smiled that bashful smile. "I try to be. My mom always said to treat others as you'd want to be treated."

"You do...a good job." He was fighting a losing battle.

"Are you okay?" Streak leaned forward.

"Yes. No. Oh, I'm so—sorry." Volle gulped and then lurched toward the wolf, hanging his muzzle down into the channel as the meal came raging back up. His body shuddered and coughed, and when it was over he lay there, the sour taste still in his muzzle, his ears flat in embarrassment.

"Oh, gods, I'm sorry. All that rich food." The wolf's paw was stroking his head, as grimy and matted as the fur was.

Volle lapped some water from the wall, spit it out, and rolled back over with a little effort. "Not your fault. I probably ate too fast." He gave a wan smile.

"Here." Streak took the cloth napkin and wetted it in the water, then gently wiped off Volle's muzzle. The fox held perfectly still while the napkin brushed the vomit from his muzzle and worked around his head, cleaning the fur between his eyes, along his cheek ruffs, and up his soft ears. Streak had to rewet the cloth several times, and when he was done it was filthy; even in the torchlight Volle could see that. But Streak stuffed it in his pocket without looking at it, his eyes fixed on Volle's muzzle.

"You do clean up nice," he said softly. Volle looked back at him without saying anything, looking into the clear eyes that were blue even in the dim torchlight. They came closer, slowly, until Streak's nose was touching his own. Then, gently, their muzzles parted and met in a soft kiss.

Volle closed his eyes and sighed. He kept his tongue in his muzzle because he still had some of the sour taste on it, but he could feel the light flicker of Streak's tongue against his lips. The wolf's scent at this distance filled his nostrils and made him forget the queasiness in his stomach.

Too soon, it was over, and Streak was sitting up. "I guess I should go." But he didn't get up, or move to the door.

Volle nodded. "I guess so."

They held each other's eyes for the space of several heartbeats, and then Streak got to his feet slowly and fluidly. "Bye."

"See you soon," Volle said.

Streak nodded, and then was gone.

Volle dreamt that night that Streak returned, naked and holding a glittering sword. He held it over the shackled fox and said, "I can cut you free, but you must renounce your country. Promise you won't give them the plans you stole. I'll take you away with me and keep you safe."

In his dream, Volle couldn't take his eyes off the sword. He could see its edge, sharp and menacing. "I can't," he breathed.

Streak's eyes pleaded with him. "It's the only way we can be together."

Yes, his body screamed, but he couldn't make his muzzle form the words. "I can't give up my country."

"If you die here, they still won't have your information. Why should you die?"

He could see his friends beyond the cell, mute and staring at him. Beyond them, the country he loved spread out: the red mountains behind the rolling plains, the sparkling expanse of Kell Lake, and the shining towers of the palace. "We'll know," they seemed to be saying.

He moaned and turned away. "I can't."

Streak's blue eyes closed. Without a word, he raised the sword and swung it viciously downward.

Volle woke with a start. The torch had gone out and the cell was pitch black. His heart was pounding in his chest and his wrists were sore where the shackles held them. He flipped over, pressing his muzzle between his arms and waiting for his panic to subside. What would he do, if Streak came back and gave him that ultimatum? It would never happen, of course, but wasn't that what he was being asked to do?

No, it wasn't. He was simply being asked to betray his country and his friends. There was no chance he would have a life with Streak. He was going to die in this cell, or possibly in an execution chamber somewhere.

When Streak visited him the next evening, the dream was still lingering in his head, but he managed to force a smile. Streak returned it, and sat down across the channel in the floor. He looked down at his paws and then up at Volle.

"What's this all leading to?" He said it quietly, but the intensity of his gaze betrayed the emotion behind it.

"You're being used to make me betray my friends," Volle said dully. "They sent you here to make me fall in love with you so they could use you as leverage on me."

"They wouldn't..." Streak began, and then stopped, thinking.

"They would. They are." Volle looked away, at the stone wall on his other side. He traced the familiar pattern of cracks with his eyes. "Sometime soon, you'll be told that this duty is over. Depending on what I do, maybe you'll get to see me one more time. Maybe you'll get to see me when they kill me. Maybe not at all. But then it'll be over. You're better off forgetting me."

"I asked to be transferred," Streak said, and Volle turned to look at him. "After that first time. I'd been living alone in the guard barracks for two weeks, and I didn't think I could be the horrible thing they wanted me to be to you. But they wouldn't transfer me. And it's been over a month now, and you're the only person who's said more than two sentences to me in that time." He drew in a sharp breath. "And you seem so much better than the other guards. They just care about their pay, and what pretty things they stuck their cocks into last time down at the pub. You care about your country. You care so much that you went through being whipped and tortured, and you didn't tell. That's honorable. You don't deserve this."

"Maybe I would be better off forgetting you. But I don't think I can."

Volle's eyes misted over. He fought to control his emotions. "It's really the best thing..." he began, but Streak closed his muzzle with a paw.

"Oh, shut up," he said, and leaned over, pressing his muzzle to the fox's in a deep, warm kiss.

Volle arched into the kiss, his ears coming forward as his eyes closed in pleasure. Streak's tongue was cool and slick against his, and he pulled it into his muzzle as though his life depended on it. He felt the warm caress of the wolf's breath against his muzzle, the soft touch of his fur, and the hard points of his teeth as they slid against his own. The kiss was full of passion, hunger, and longing, and Volle returned it in kind.

He didn't want it to end, but of course it did. Slowly, gently, Streak pulled his muzzle back. Volle lay back and opened his eyes. "Wow."

Streak bit his lip, and rested a paw on Volle's chest, tracing the line of one of his ribs. "I know I shouldn't. But I can't let go. I keep thinking if I can find some way to get you out of here..."

"Don't think like that," Volle said sharply, though his fur was tingling at the touch. "If you have hope then I might have hope, and I don't want hope. That's what they want me to have."

"I think you're being paranoid," Streak said. "They can't know what's going on here. For all they know, I've been torturing you."

"I think they know, somehow. You're too...too beautiful. I thought when I first saw you that you were too perfect to be a coincidence. I've always had a bit of a thing for wolves, and you're just..." He sighed, and smiled. "Sorry. I wasn't expecting you to be as sweet inside as you looked outside. I don't know if they were either. But they (*he*) could easily have found out (*knows*)

that I like wolves. I wasn't exactly discreet about my liaisons during my time in the palace."

"I bet you could have had any male or female you wanted."

Volle smiled. "Now you're just saying that to be polite."

Streak smiled back and lowered his muzzle, ears flicking. "So...what do we do now?"

"Now?" Volle flicked his ears and let his smile widen. "Well, I have an idea..."

Streak watched, amused, as the fox flipped over and lapped several gulps of water from the wall. When he turned back over, the wolf grinned. "What?"

"I don't want to think about the future any more. And there's something I've been wanting to do since that first day," Volle smiled.

"Oh?" Streak's gaze flicked down between the fox's legs, where his sheath was showing signs of life. The wolf grinned. "What's that?"

"Mmm. Maybe you could kneel up here and let me see that equipment of yours up close." Volle tried to sound more bashful than eager, but he couldn't stop his tail from smacking the stone floor as it wagged.

The wolf smiled and stood up, unfastening his pants and sliding them down to the ground. He cupped his paw around his groin for a moment, self-consciously, then dropped it to his side, leaving his sheath exposed with his shirt hanging down on either side.

Volle followed the plump white ridge of fur, already showing some red at its tip, as Streak stepped over him and slowly knelt astride him. The fox craned his head forward until his nose was just brushing the soft white fur, panting with the effort until the wolf's paws slid behind his head to support him. Slowly, he drew his tongue up the warm length of fur, and was gratified to see how quickly it swelled and pushed the wolf's cock further out.

Above him, he heard a gasp, and he felt the warm rumble of pleasure in the wolf's chest. He started the next lick lower, giving the dangling sac a curl of his tongue before sliding up the thick sheath again. He stopped just below the top, though his eyes were drawn to the length above it. On the next lick, he didn't stop, letting his tongue travel all the way to the tip and stopping there.

Streak breathed harder, and Volle wagged his tail as best he could. His own cock was hard and full too, lying on his belly, and the wolf's tail was tickling it as it wagged back and forth. He licked again, and though he'd done this with many other males, was struck by how happy he was to be making this white wolf shiver. Streak had become important to him, and so this act was more than just the hedonistic enjoyment of a cock in his muzzle, or a return obligation; it was an expression of his feelings. He was prevented from using his paws to caress the wolf, and this was all he could do.

He licked again and again, and at some point Streak's hips shifted and Volle found himself staring

down the glistening length of the wolf's erection. He smiled and slid his muzzle around it, feeling its warmth on his tongue and its familiar hardness against his teeth. He held it for a moment, marveling again at how the feeling could be so new when he'd done this a hundred times.

The wolf's paws guided his head with the impatience of passion, and Volle could taste the wolf's need in the thick musk on his tongue. He slid obligingly back and forth, and the wolf's hips met him and pulled back with him. The musk grew stronger, the wolf's movements quickened and became more erratic, and Volle found himself tensing with excitement. Streak was moaning now, and Volle's erection shivered in sympathy as he felt the thick length in his muzzle drip musk onto his tongue. They were moving together now, as easily as if they'd been together for years, and Volle couldn't say how he knew the moment was coming, but he did.

He braced himself just before Streak let out a breathless squeak, pushing Volle's head into his hips. His cock was all the way into the fox's muzzle, thick knot and all, and a few seconds later Volle felt the warm splash on his tongue. He swallowed, licking around the thick shuddering length as the lovely white wolf above him bent forward, entirely focused on his climax.

It was over entirely too soon. Volle swallowed again, though he was trying to savor the rich musky taste of Streak. Slowly, the wolf sat back, letting his dripping erection slide out of the fox's muzzle. Volle looked up and gave the wolf a warm smile.

"I liked that a lot."

"You liked it? Oh, gods, fox." Streak leaned over and let his paws slide down so he was holding Volle's chest. "I've been with a couple, but...never like that."

Volle licked his lips and nuzzled the wolf. "Mmm. I'm glad you liked it." He sighed happily.

Streak held him for a long moment, and then slid off to lie between Volle and the wall. He let an arm rest on Volle's chest, and rested his head on the fox's shoulder. "I liked it, yes. And now I don't want to go."

"You'll always have to." Volle sighed. "Sorry." He nuzzled Streak again.

"You're right, though. I will. But not just yet." He slid his paw down Volle's stomach and smiled. "I think I have some unfinished business."

"You really don't have to." The protest was weak.

"You can't stop me." Streak grinned, eyes half-closed as his paw closed around Volle's erection.

Volle shivered, and closed his eyes as the wolf started to stroke. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Again, he was amazed at the freshness of it. Even compared to the last time the wolf had masturbated him, this felt subtly different (well, for one thing, it hadn't been two months since his last release). Streak's muzzle lay next to his, his soft breaths passing across Volle's matted fur. His taste lingered in Volle's muzzle. His body was warm and close, and his paw's strokes seemed each to be lovingly planned and executed.

It took longer this time, but not much. Volle felt the climax building a long ways off and panted more quickly as it grew. He felt Streak's body respond and felt as though the wolf could feel what he was feeling. And when it came, he felt the warmth between their bodies feed into it, holding him and Streak together in a trembling moment of bliss before he fell over the edge, moaning loudly as his semen spurted out over Streak's paw.

He almost fell back into the wolf's arms, still shivering. "Mmm," Streak said into his ear. "I enjoyed *that*."

"Oh..." was all Volle could manage. He felt himself drifting off into sleep, his weakened body's reserves used up by the night's activities.

Streak held him, and as he drifted off he heard the wolf say, "I think I can stay just a bit longer."

He woke to inky darkness, alone, but his back was still warm. He heard the rustle of cloth on fur near him, and turned his head, the wolf's smell strong in the cell. "Streak?" he whispered.

The noise stopped, and after a moment there was a soft chuckle. "Is that what you call me?"

Volle flicked his ears back in embarrassment. "Um. Yeah."

"Why 'Streak'?"

"Are you leaving?"

His whiskers and ears told him the wolf had moved. "In a minute. Don't change the subject." His voice came from lower down, closer to Volle's muzzle.

"Oh, well, you have this cute black streak on your hip...and the first thing you did was take your clothes off."

"My clothes? What does that have to do with it?"

"You never streaked as a kid?"

"Don't know what that is."

"It just means stripping and running out in public. You know, naked." Volle chuckled. "It was a big thing at our school for about a year. I did it twice."

"You city boys." Streak sounded amused. "Well, I think it's cute."

Volle didn't know why Streak assumed he was from the city. He had grown up in the city, but the background story he'd told at the palace was that he'd grown up on a farm. He was too tired and happy to maintain the lie now, so he let it go. After a pause, he said, "What do you call me?"

"Just 'fox.'"

"You don't know any other foxes?"

"Not right now. Listen, I don't know how long I was asleep. I should get out of here before Gerrold comes in."

"Yeah. Hurry. I'll see you again soon."

"Count on it." The wolf's muzzle moved tentatively towards his; they found each other quickly and shared a brief kiss. He saw Streak's silhouette in the door's frame as it opened. The wolf turned and looked at him, then closed the door, leaving him in darkness once again.

He lay awake for what might have been one hour or three, thinking about Streak, and about his situation. He

tried to concentrate on the pleasant memories, but the thought of what he'd do if they took the wolf away from him kept intruding. They didn't have much time left, he was sure of that. Maybe one or two more visits, and that would be it.

The door opened, and the skunk shuffled in with a plate of food. He set it down next to Volle, and in the dim light from the door, Volle thought he saw the skunk's nose wrinkle at the musky scents in the cell.

"So," he said impulsively, "what's the name of that white wolf who comes in here sometimes? I'd like to report him. He's been very abusive."

The skunk stopped and stared at him, then shook his head and turned away without a word. He picked the torch out of the ceiling bracket but didn't replace it with a new one.

"Hey! Where's my light? You can't just leave me here in—" The door slammed shut. Of course Limp Stripes could leave him in the dark.

This was different. And it didn't look to be good.

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[To be concluded in Heat #2...]



Welcome to the end of the first issue of *Heat*. The magazine which you hold in your hands has been a long time in coming to fruition, and I hope you enjoyed the fine artwork

and stories we pulled together for you. I figured a bit of a history of the creation was in order here.

The idea to produce an adult themed magazine had been kicking around the Sofawolf Press staff for a year or so before we put it onto the schedule. We knew we wanted to do something different, and therein lay the problem... When we were designing the layouts for *Anthrolations* we had numerous terrific examples to refer to, knowing that it was the quality of the content and printing which would set it apart. A short story magazine is, after all, all about the fantastic stories in it.

The treatment of erotic stories and art needed something further—something with a unifying style which would tie the diverse elements together and provide a recognizable package. I found inspiration in the design of pop-culture, design, and alternative press magazines from the US and Europe. All three feature free-flowing layouts with curves and soft edges, striking visual impact, and an exciting sense of design. If I could carry some of that inspiration into the creation of our own magazine, I knew we'd have something fresh and new.

Sadly, this proved to be impossible. Many of the design elements and concepts do not work in black and white or grayscale, and the economies of small press publication make extensive use of color printing highly impractical. In addition the free-flowing layouts work well with content that can be easily broken into chunks,

but tend to hinder readability with short stories. We had a lot of false starts while figuring this all out, and ultimately just went back to the drawing board with more realistic expectations.

In fact, about all that remains from the initial concept is the title and the cover of our first issue. Aside from suggesting both furriness and erotic content, *Heat* is the sort of one-word expressive title which is favored by the magazines I was hoping to emulate. The cover design, which a handful of children of the 80's may recognize as an homage to the Power Station album cover (settled on long before the death of Robert Palmer late last year), was just the kind of snappy pop-culture feel I hoped for.

What you see within is what I proudly consider step one in what I hope to be an ongoing process of development and design. Even in its infancy, it features some things that set it apart from the bulk of other adult themed magazines in the fandom. Not only are the stories of the caliber readers have come to expect from Sofawolf publications; but the presence of poetry, commentary, and even a bit of refrigerator-magnet wordplay helps to freshen things up a bit.

What comes next is anyone's guess. I hope that getting this first issue out there will stimulate some creativity and get people thinking in new directions. We hope to expand on our comic story content in the next issue as well as get some more poetry, but I am particularly looking forward to hearing what other ideas people can come up with as well. There loads of people in this fandom who are stunningly creative in the visual and literary arts, and what lies within these covers is just a small sample. With the release of this first issue of *Heat*, we have simply provided another canvas for their use and your enjoyment.

H

HEAT

Managing Editor—Jeff Eddy

Associate Editors—Tim Susman, Alopex, J. Scott Rogers

Pearl: © 2002 by Lars Hellberg, illustrations © 2003 by Ayame Emaya

Might I Suggest...: © 2003 by Tim Susman

Government Issue: © 2002 by Renee Carter Hall, illustrations © 2003 by Aura Moser

The Quandary: © 2002 by Marrok Alexander Wolf, illustrations © 2003 by Cara Mitten

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The Prisoner's Release: © 2002 by Kyell Gold, illustrations © 2002 by Taurin Fox

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Additional art © 2003 by Lonnie DiNello

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Animal Magnetism

bare your naked belly
to my love squirrel

we tremble and slobber
your musk is velvet ecstasy
the faithful pack
crave s to mount your luscious tail
and satisfy a throbbing lust
you can never understand

whine bitch
dirty hump you raw
I will
ram

grind
pound
all through the night

nasty wet hydrant
I must lick

discover
canine beauty
intelligent companion
embrace the animal in her
let her retrieve your
every pleasure

sexy
yap

his
soft nose
gentle paws &
fur like golden torrents of lava

I
beg him
to slide his hungry tongue
over my swollen boy bone &
plunge his tremendous shaft inside me
until I howl & convulse with aching passion

worship her exquisite dog breath

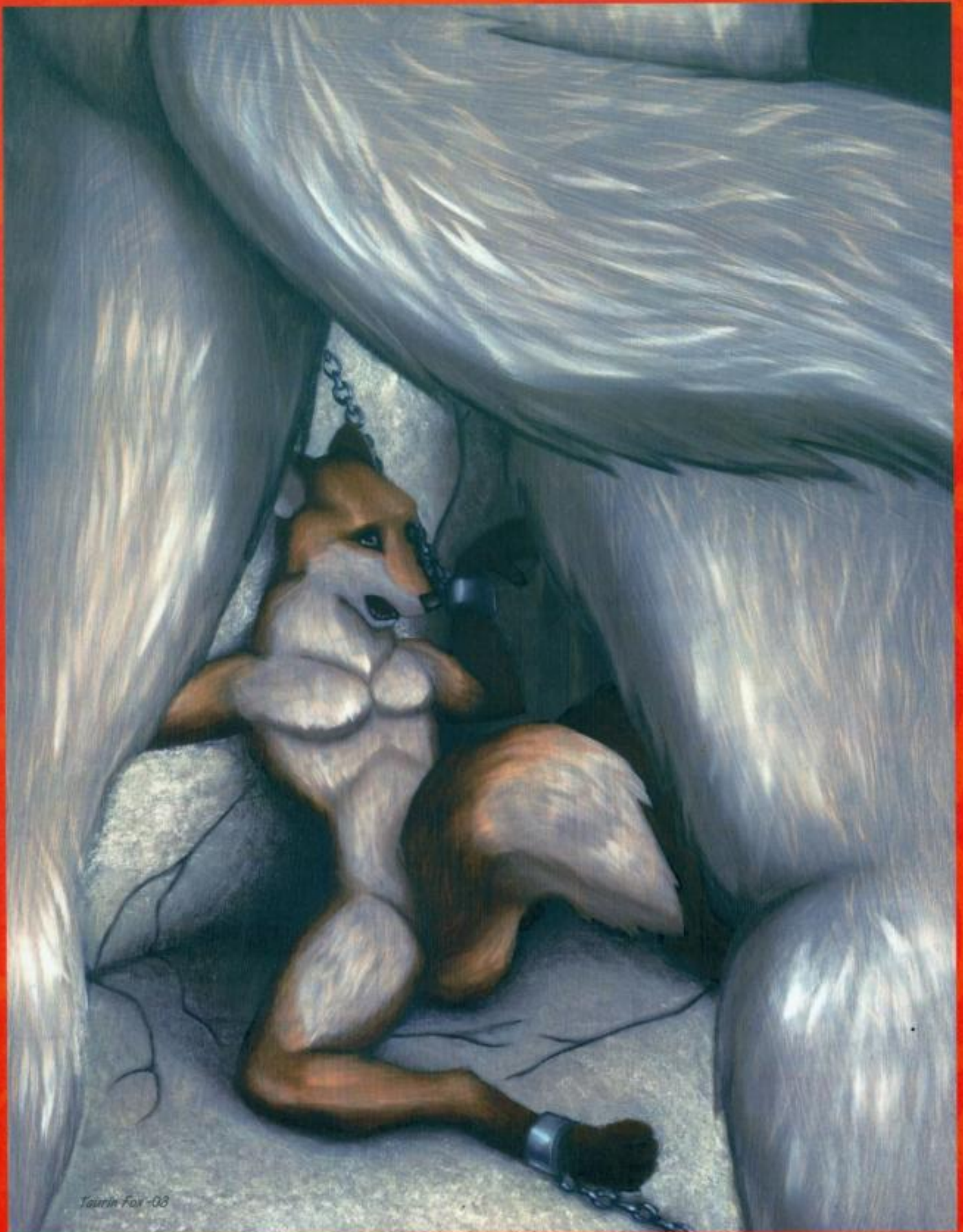
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THE PRISONER'S RELEASE—PART ONE

BY KYELL GOLD



Taurin Fox '08